

Short Writings from Bulawayo III



**Edited by
Jane Morris**

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from
Bulawayo
III

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'amaBooks



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The Boy with a Crooked Head

Thabisani Ndlovu

So I sit here. I am just as useless as my Uncle Vikitha who disappeared three days ago. There were soldiers here. Soldiers with radios that went sh...sh...sh... most of the time. Then at times they spoke into them and said, “Over...over... over....” And then there was a voice and then the radios went back to saying sh...sh...sh... most of the time. And people say there are soldiers because it is a war. And others say no, it is not a war. They say it is a fight. A fighting. You see how it is? I want you to understand.

Do you know what disappearing is? No. That’s not how I want to tell you this. I think I should tell you about the smell first. I think... No no. That won’t do. Because you will ask me questions which I won’t be able to answer. Like Teacher Sibanda who ended up trembling with anger because I couldn’t get his Maths problems right. He said I should tell him what he should write on the green board and asked questions that flowed like an angry river. He said I needed to be organized. And to pay attention. Said there was something wrong with my head and whacked it with a stick. That was before I left school.

So what I learnt from school is to try to be organized. As long as you don’t ask me questions that fall fast and sting like a hailstorm or Teacher Sibanda’s cane, I can tell you what I want to tell you in an organized way.

So I sit here and watch the cattle spoil for a fight on the spot Ntombi was slaughtered yesterday. Such a fat and beautiful brown cow with a white patch on the forehead, cute little horns and smiling eyes. She looked like Noma smiling, the beautiful girl who used to sit next to me in class when I still went to school last year. I’m telling you all this because I want you to understand. I’m being organized. So I’m going to tell you everything.

Ntombi’s story is simple because she had a broken leg and bad sores with clouds of flies humming in and out. No doubt someone had broken her leg and axed her several times on her neck and left backside. She was rotting.

It must have been the work of Jamu. He is the one who hurts people’s cattle like that if they get into his field and graze his green mealies. He is cruel that man. When he dies he will burn in hell. So when Ntombi wobbled into the kraal yesterday with flies humming like an aeroplane high up in the sky and maggots wriggling like a bunch of crazy white wires in her sores,

Uncle Finias, the one who has not disappeared, said, "Let's finish her off." With a huge sweep, the large sharp axe glinted briefly in the sun before sinking into Ntombi's neck, just behind her head. She trembled and moaned in a tired way, tongue lolling out. The axe shone again in the sun, with some blood on it and fell again. I didn't wait for the rest. I didn't eat Ntombi's meat. Her story is simpler than Uncle Vikitha's because Uncle Vikitha disappeared. Do you understand? That's what Teacher Sibanda would say now and again, "Do you understand?"

I don't understand much myself. Ask anyone and they'll tell you I don't understand much and I'm strange and the inside of my head is funny. I beat up other children. "What do you expect from a child of war?" the adults say. That's the reason I don't go to school anymore. No. Actually it's one of two reasons.

Someone must herd the cattle and Uncle Finias, my only other uncle, the one who has not disappeared like Uncle Vikitha, said I should do it because at school I couldn't tell the difference between one letter and another. Which is not very true because I still know how the word 'father' looks in both English and Ndebele even though I don't have a father. In English, the head of the first letter droops like the head of an old man or a sad person. In Ndebele 'baba' starts with a letter that looks like a bumless person with a big belly. The big belly men get from drinking too much beer and eating too much meat. They end up looking like pregnant women with flat backsides.

So Uncle Finias said, as reason number two for my leaving school, "Besides, this boy is very violent. His head is full of scorpions. It looks like an ancestral thing and how do we appease his ancestors if we don't even know who his father is." He also said he was tired of going to school to beg the headmaster to let me stay each time I beat up some of my classmates.

What Uncle Finias didn't know is that it started with numbers. Teacher Sibanda's Grade Five sums were playing games with me. Never mind that I was repeating Grade Five, try as hard as I could to grasp the sums, I couldn't. The numbers did queer dances and darted in front of my face, as slippery as fish, jeering at me. When I tried to catch them, they slipped, laughing. Leaving me with Teacher Sibanda who shook with anger and let his switch cut into my legs giving me reddish welts that looked like small snakes on my legs.

So when those children, my classmates, younger than I was, made rings with their index fingers pointing at their heads to say I was mad, I chased them, caught them and beat them up. They were not as slippery or as fast as

the numbers. So I caught them and when I slapped them, I also slapped into silence the jeering of the numbers. It was like spearing a fish, straight through. Flip-flap, flip-flop on the blade, surprised fish eyes and the sharp edges of the blade smiling in the sun. After beating them up, I felt peaceful. Like the feel of a crisp morning after a long good night's sleep.

But now, I'm not feeling peaceful at all. They took Uncle Vikitha, those soldiers with radios going sh...sh...sh... most of the time. Soldiers in a war that is not a war. Who spoke our language in a funny way, like children. But not friendly like children because they didn't smile. They were serious. Very serious and beat up some people including Grandpa and Uncle Finias. They gave them huge slaps across the face, you could have heard the flesh slap sound from across the river.

They took Uncle Vikitha, a useless person who spends his time chasing after old women. That's what my grandmother says. Uncle Vikitha also gets very drunk and sings at the top of his voice all kinds of obscenities. But he sings them beautifully. I'm serious! So we don't tell Gogo that the obscenities Uncle Vikitha sings are beautiful to listen to.

So you see, Uncle Vikitha is given to drink, as Gogo usually says. I think it's true because beer has accepted him and they are good friends. "A bearded man like you," Gogo once shouted from inside the kitchen when Uncle Vikitha was singing one of his dirty songs to us the children one evening, sitting around a fire just outside the kitchen. "Very soon you'll grow a white one, still no wife. All you do is follow old women and sing obscenities. Do you want to grow horns before you can marry and become a decent man?"

That's what Gogo said. Exactly that. It was because Uncle Vikitha was singing and jiving round the fire, strumming an imaginary guitar. He was moving his waist round and round in that way that Grandmother said was shameful and singing about a girl called Regina who refused to be his lover because she had run into him squatting some place in the bush relieving himself. I don't know of any girl called Regina.

After his Regina song, Uncle Vikitha would usually say, "Okay children. Let's do something responsible. It's church time!" Then he sang Apostolic Faith songs. He said to me one day that he was once a member of that church before I was born. Uncle Vikitha would have an imaginary drum, the type that is beaten on both ends, hanging by an imaginary rope from his neck. He would sing and imitate the sounds of the drum as he shuffled round the fire. Eventually, Uncle Vikitha whirled faster and faster as his drum picked up

tempo, and then he would make a song like a belching steam train going 'kush-kush-kush-kush'. Just watching him whirl around like that made me dizzy. Then he fell down possessed by the holy spirit or demons. Then a deep silence as he lay there, twisting and turning. Suddenly Uncle Vikitha would burst into laughter at seeing our worried faces, and we laughed too. His laugh always ended in a raspy rush of air.

So now I sit here watching these cattle, spoiling for a fight. I told you about the smell. No. Let me tell you about the running first. I want to be organized.

I have never run the way I did this morning. I thought I would die because when I came to the group of adults under the big mango tree, their faces were floating in the air and my light head was going round and round. I heard their voices coming from a deep well.

"What is it?" asked Uncle Finias, the one who hasn't disappeared. He is the one who is a proper adult because he has a wife and children and isn't given to drink. He is always serious and likes stroking his beard. He doesn't sing any dirty songs. I have never heard him sing. When he is angry, he beats up everyone, including his wife. So you see why I couldn't tell him about the crazy dance of the numbers. He says he is the one who talks and everyone listens.

I said to Uncle Finias, "Over there..." pointing and gasping. My throat and chest burnt inside and there was no spit in my mouth. My knees wobbled. I crumpled to the ground and I lay there, looking up, panting. The green leaves of the mango tree and the holes of blue sky through them were one big heavy hat just about to fall on me and crush me like a rock. I rolled away from it. Rolled on the ground until the hot sand burnt my skin. It was as if a stone was rolling in my head, knocking against my skull.

Then Uncle Finias was holding me under the armpits. I wanted to stand but my feet kept sliding under me as if the ground was too muddy. I tried to point with my limp hand. "What?" Uncle Finias shouted into my ear and the stone in my head rattled with the echoes. And the sky came lower. He shook me like someone trying to remove a stubborn insect clinging onto a piece of cloth. My teeth clattered. The ground went over the sky. I think he heard that I was saying there were people being eaten by dogs near a thicket behind his fields.

Then so many words were pouring out of his mouth very fast and his beard was quivering around bared mud coloured teeth. Then he let me flop to the ground and spoke to the rest of the adults. I heard something familiar,

even though it had the sound of being under water, something about my crooked head. My head full of worms. Then Juni's father, our neighbour to the East, was saying something about going to see, going to see. All the same, going to see.

It was the smell. It shot through my nostrils, sat in my head and refused to leave. It's still in my head. From my head it dived into my stomach and scooped out all the sadza and milk I had this morning before setting off to herd cattle. Then there was something like the growling of dogs and droning of bees behind a thicket from which the smell was coming.

Two dogs were snarling at each other, their mouths quivering. In between them was the leg of a person from which clouds of flies buzzed away when the dogs moved nearer and buzzed back when the dogs moved away. One dog was licking the shiny dome of a skull with punctured eyes as if both eyes were slyly winking. Then I saw two other skulls and what looked like a heap of green-blue mathumbu. I left the rest of the milk and sadza on the ground and my stomach continued heaving and heaving. Drunk with the smell, I ran, stumbling. Because I knew if I didn't run, the smell would choke me to death. I ran. And ran.

Uncle Finias and the rest of the adults are back now. They are sitting under the big mango tree. No one is saying anything. Seven heads and seven mouths and none of the mouths are saying anything. They must be drunk from the smell and thinking about those people near that thicket. In the morning these adults were huddled together under the big mango tree before I went to herd cattle. They were huddled together talking in low voices like sopping wet chicks from the rain with their small sad voices by the fireside. I had heard them say something about Uncle Vikitha, Headmaster Nkabinde and Maphosa the businessman who owns a store and a grinding mill. The other two men had also disappeared after the soldiers with radios that went sh...sh...sh... most of the time took them.

Now, no one is saying anything. Their heads are drooping, like the first letter of the English word, 'father'.

So you see why I sit here. This is where Ntombi was killed. The bulls and oxen are scraping the ground in backward sweeps that send a mixture of soil and manure into the air. I can smell both. Quite clearly. I wonder if these two are really mixed in the air. The other smell, this morning's smell, is there too. It just squats in my head and won't go. I think it has even brought a stool to sit on and relax. It makes me feel sick and that's why I have been spitting onto the ground. Spitting, and spitting and spitting. I haven't eaten

anything and I don't want to.

Two bulls, heads bent sideways as if against driving rain, frown and the muscles on their thighs twitch before a thunderous thud of foreheads and click-clack of horns. And I wonder why Uncle Vikitha, a useless person, was made to disappear together with a businessman and a headmaster. In a war that is not a war. A fight. By soldiers who looked like us but spoke our language in a funny way and spoke their own strange language most of the time.

I don't understand much. I told you. Ask Uncle Finias who says my father might have died in the first war of guns against white people. Nobody knows him, not even my mother. That's why my head is not straight. A boy whose father is not known cannot have a straight head. Perhaps my father too, like Uncle Vikitha, disappeared into the smoke of a war. Perhaps he was eaten by dogs in that other war. And in that other war, were there radios going sh...sh...sh... most of the time?

The Rhythm of Life

Bryony Rheam

The day the rains started, Pattie's son died. It was the fifteenth of November. Craig swore they'd start that day. 'Half way through November' was what he always said; the fifteenth was his chosen date.

"Told you so," he said, as we sat on the kitchen step and watched the first swollen plops smatter violently on the ground. I rolled my eyes in jest. Then Pattie arrived and told us her son was dead.

"It is better," said Craig, for Garikayi had been ill for a long time.

"No, it is not better!" she wailed. "He was my son and now he is dead!" She held her stomach and leaned against the wall. I put my arm around her.

He was buried the next day. I was glad of the rain, of the relief from the heat, until I thought of the funeral. That morning I had given her money and a ten kilogram packet of mealie meal to help feed the mourners who had gathered. I knew it would not be enough.

In the afternoon, I sat on the verandah reading. Dylan Thomas. How apt was the soft rain falling just beyond the steps, the gurgle of water in the drainpipe, the gentle plash, plash of it onto the grass and nearby pot plants. A wet woody smell rose from the woven grass carpets on the floor, but it was comforting, as was the cool of the cushion behind my back. I read:

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Getting up to fetch a glass of water, I caught sight of the hanging baskets Garikayi had made. The fuchsia leant lazily out as the baskets turned slowly in the wet breeze. He had also made the carved wooden elephant that acted as a pot stand near the door. Its trunk was too large so it always gave the impression it was about to fall over, but it never had. Somehow it had always managed to maintain its balance and stand, if not completely upright, at a slightly tilting angle, as though it were about to charge. It was this that gave it an element of unusual dignity. There were other things Garikayi had made: the pots I had my hydrangea in, a rough garden table and a birdbath. He had also established our vegetable garden that now thrived full of beans, butternut, gem squash, spinach, carrots and onions. That was before he

became too thin and ill to work, although even then he would turn up at least two days a week and wander slowly round the garden, cutting off a dead flower head here and there, or occasionally poking his finger into the soil as though it would yield something of interest.

"I don't know why he bothers," Craig said once. He was sitting outside one lunchtime, smoking and blowing blue clouds of bitterness into the air.

"Don't say that," I said and he looked at me, eyes half closed and laughed, a short cynical 'ha'. I turned away and felt my stomach contract.

The last few times we saw Garikayi, he just sat and stared. That was in September and now he was dead.

It rained all through December and January and the garden flourished. One day in February, Pattie came to work with her arms full of St. Joseph Lilies. They grew under the blue gums along the railway line, hundreds of bobbing white bonnets, like a crowd of excited debutantes, whispering and giggling before their first dance.

I filled two vases and still had more left over. She started to bring them twice a week and I had to give them away. I couldn't bring myself to ask her to stop. Garikayi used to bring them before, though never as many. It was as though our smiled thanks and expressions of delight were really an acknowledgement of him and she needed him to live on.

In the autumn, we planted sweet peas. I was afraid that the frost of the approaching winter might kill them off, but it didn't. By June, they were already pushing their way upwards and, in August, they were half way up the trellis we had tied them to.

The warm, dry wind of August blew the flames of veldt fires through the bush. One reached our back garden. Craig ranted, but there was nothing we could do. We stood ready with buckets of water should the fire come any closer, but it didn't. Garikayi's vegetable garden remained untouched.

By October, Craig and I had our bet going again. He still swore by the fifteenth of November, but he was wrong this time. The rains came on the seventeenth.

"Near enough," he said, not looking me in the eye.

Pattie had a day off. She went to her son's graveside for the last time.

"No more," she said when she returned. "He is not there anymore."

I knew what she meant. We didn't go back anymore either. There was a time when we'd take a drive out Headlands way. We'd go as far as the turnoff to the farm and pull over. Sometimes it felt as though we were going home, as though we'd just gone shopping for the day. I'd imagine what we'd

have bought, what I was going to make for dinner, what had happened while we'd been away. After a while, we gave up and sometimes I felt we had always lived in town and never known any other life.

We began to look forward: next year there'd be more St. Joseph Lilies, more sweet peas to plant, more fires to put out. It is perhaps to our detriment that we rely so heavily on the soft, undulating rhythm of life for our sense of security and continuity. How many have done so only to have their plans changed, their lives cut short, their hopes curtailed? But what is there without that hope of the future, the reassurance of stability? Do we not all rage against the dying of the light?

"In April, we plant poppies," said Pattie, not long after Christmas. She was looking in a notebook of Garikayi's, his carefully made notes of seasonal plants.

"Yes, I think we shall," I said and she nodded and put the notebook away with a sigh.

I didn't see the poppies or the sweet peas that year. In April we left. The house was sold and we waved Zimbabwe good-bye. I miss it often. Most of all, I miss the way the seasons change, the way the sun slants on the late afternoon lawn, the half light of dawn. No one brings me St. Joseph Lilies and we have no space for a vegetable garden. I do, however, have Garikayi's notebook, pressed into my hands by a tearful Pattie. I flick through it sometimes when I am most homesick. I think of what Pattie will be growing, how the vegetable garden is doing and whether the sweet peas will survive the frost.

Lately, I have taken to carrying the notebook in my handbag. I hold it close as I squash into overfilled railway carriages, as I shudder and shake on the long journey to work and back. It beats out the rhythm of home and I find comfort, still.

Cain and Abel

Raisedon Baya

Cain sat, perched on the wooden bench outside Sango's bottle store gulping his favourite traditional beer and contemplating murder. Two young boys were playing mini soccer next to him while the jukebox blared from inside. It was Tuesday. A lonely, boring Tuesday. A crow hovered above and settled on the leafless tree metres away from Cain. It looked hungry, Cain thought, as he looked away from it. His eyes wandered. He waved at Molly who worked in the shop next to Sango's. She was a sweet little thing. Cain had tried to take her to bed once and she had laughed at the idea. Most women he had tried taking to bed, save for cheap prostitutes, laughed at him whenever he made the suggestion.

Cain was a bullfrog. He was fat, short and with a pot-belly that seriously threatened to cover his private parts. One reason women laughed at the idea of going to bed with him. They couldn't imagine the pot-belly not getting in the way. His shoulders were broad and, because of his short thick neck, his head appeared as if it was sinking. His face was plain, furrowed and rough - giving it a kind of tough and antagonistic look.

The thought of murder had been buzzing in his head like a troublesome fly since Abel had written to say he would be visiting from Harare on Friday. The moment Cain had finished reading the letter a film of sweat had started forming on his fingers. He was excited. He saw this visit as the perfect opportunity to avenge his mother's death. This was his time. A time to avenge all the wrongs done to him.

Murder! That is what he was planning, but deep down in his cold heart, Cain did not want just to kill. He wanted to do it in style, like it was done in those horror movies he had seen at the cinema. Something gory, something that would leave the whole town petrified, numb with fear. He sat on the bench for hours, alone, occasionally picking up his scud and savouring the sour taste of the beer. He toyed with one idea, stretching it as far as his mind would allow, before discarding it and jumping onto another.

Abel had to die. Cain had resolved this long back. Killing Abel would be hitting his father and stepmother where it hurt most. They had made him suffer. He remembered his grandmother's place where they had dumped him two weeks after his mother's death. He was just ten years old then and staying with his grandmother had opened his eyes to the evil people do to

others. It also taught him to trust no one else in life except himself.

VaMakanyara was his maternal grandmother. Cain simply called her gogo, even though she was not his biological grandmother. His biological grandmother had died before he was even born. There were no pictures of her or mementos and so to Cain it was as if she had never existed. The same went for his paternal grandparents. To Cain, gogo was the only grandmother he had ever known.

In reality gogo was Cain's grandmother's younger sister. And for reasons best known to herself, she had never married and had no children or grandchildren of her own. When Cain came she embraced him and treated him like her own child. To Cain, gogo became everything. Mother. Friend. Teacher. Everything. He even temporarily forgot about town, his father and his new family.

Cain stood up from where he was sitting. Suddenly he became aware of an abandoned shopping trolley lying idly under the leafless jacaranda tree. He stopped moving and his eyes narrowed on the trolley. How had it got this far when the supermarket was some four kilometres away? Probably the work of a naughty street kid, he thought. But why had he not seen it before? Like the fat toad he was, Cain waddled towards the trolley, hypnotized, excited.

The music from the jukebox stopped and, in the immediate silence that followed, Cain was able to pick up a distant but audible funeral song coming from the town's only funeral parlour. The song reminded him of his grandmother's funeral. They had sung the same song the day they laid her to rest. He touched the trolley. It would be perfect for the job. Holding the trolley with both hands, Cain began pushing it around the tree - a lonely child pushing a new found toy.

Molly, who was watching him from behind her counter, couldn't help but laugh. She thought he was either really drunk or going mad. Cain didn't see her laugh but, even if he had done, he wouldn't have cared. After all, women were always laughing at him. He ran, excited, his face glowing. He could see the images. They were so vivid. Grim and ghoulish images of breaking metal, breaking bones and blood.... He stopped running, exhausted and panting. After pushing the trolley back under the tree, the fat toad went back to Sango's.

His grandmother had been relatively rich. Twelve cattle. More than a dozen goats. Countless chickens. At 72 she was still strong enough to plough and

cultivate her own fields without help. She was always in the fields, working. After working on the land, she would come back to cook for Cain. Sometimes he would help her, especially with water or firewood. And when supper was over, the two would sit around the fire and gogo would entertain Cain with her endless fairy stories, most of which involved singing. They would sing until one of them got tired or silently succumbed to sleep.

A spinster. Old and moderately rich. The whole village hated her. The women were simply jealous, while the men felt threatened by her presence. Most villagers were not even on speaking terms with her. They had branded her a witch and, whenever someone died, fingers would be raised and pointed in her direction. Cain had to stomach some of the insults that were heaped at her by boys and girls of his age, some even younger. In the end he became a loner. Alone he moved and alone he played.

“The whole village hates me, muzukuru. They are jealous of me. They come here with smiles, but I know deep inside they are insulting me. But let them do or say whatever they want. Insults will not remove food from this house or kill me,” she would say with creases on her face.

“And I know that if I die today no one in the village is going to bury me. That is why I go to church so that someone will come and bury me decently,” she would add. Her going to church had been a puzzle. Once a devout traditionalist, shrine keeper and chief speaker with the village mhondoro, she had abandoned all that for church.

“I’m going to die,” she had said one night after a sumptuous supper of sadza and dried mice. She loved mice, especially the type with a shiny white belly called shana. Cain had made it his business to provide her with one or two of the delicacy everyday. He trapped them every night with a big, flat stone and some smoked groundnuts as bait.

“Why do you say that? Are you ill?” Cain had asked, confused.

“I’m going to die. I heard the owl call my name last night and I know what it means.” Cain had not believed her then. But it was only a matter of days before tragedy struck.

“They have killed me. They want me dead,” she screamed the day she had a stroke.

In the bottle store Cain stopped before the counter.

“Barman,” he called, his voice a bullfrog’s croak. The barman, who for no apparent reason detested being called barman, looked at him sharply, his unblinking artificial eye burrowing into Cain’s eyes. There were many

stories concerning that eye. Some said it was a goat's eye, while some believed it was from a dog and a third group would have sworn that the eye was in fact a human one that had been taken from a dead man and replanted in the barman. It was a terrible eye, one that made you look away when it came your way.

"What time does that train from Harare to Bulawayo pass through here?" Cain asked.

"Around 11pm. Why?"

"Nothing important."

"Planning on going somewhere?"

"Maybe." Cain managed a smile, albeit a stupid one.

He ordered another scud and then plodded out. Watching the fat toad walk out the barman couldn't help but smile. It was during moments like these that he realised how fortunate he was. Even with his artificial eye he still looked much better than Cain. Women found him very handsome and actually fought to be with him. He looked upwards, perhaps to say thank you to the Man above, and smiled.

Outside, Cain did not sit on the bench, neither did he go back to the trolley. He crossed the lonely Kaguvi Street and headed straight to the railway crossing where he looked for a big stone and sat down. He shook his scud and gulped a few mouthfuls. Then he turned himself into a thinker, a tactician and a strategist. Nothing was going to stop him from murder. Nothing. Not now.

The news of gogo's death was met with wailing and screaming in the village. Women and men who had not seen eye to eye with his grandmother came crying, shedding buckets of tears and throwing themselves on the ground, almost breaking their limbs. At the graveyard he heard her being praised by her enemies. He almost believed them, he wanted to believe them, but gogo's voice kept coming to him and reminding him of the truth.

"When I die they'll come and pretend to cry just as jackals do when they see dead meat. When they are doing that, just watch them and laugh," she had told him once. He wanted to laugh, but instead found himself crying. He had not cried when his mother died. His father forbade him to. He had not even seen them bury her, he had been left behind, locked in one of the rooms. After burying gogo, they had scrambled for her property, taking everything. Cattle. Goats. Chickens. Furniture. Everything. A week later they took Cain and dumped him back at his father's doorstep.

Yes. Abel had to die. That was the only way he could get back at his father and stepmother. For Abel was not just a son to them, he was their source of pride, their darling son. Since childhood Abel had always been the favourite child, receiving special toys and gifts while he, the wretched Cain, received little. And when he did receive something, it was always some second hand junk Abel would have rejected. One day he had tried to complain, only to get a thorough beating from both his father and Abel's mother. Afterwards he never complained. He took whatever was given to him with a practised smile and, as he grew up, he became bitter and angry.

He was bitter and angry about his mother, how they drove her to the edge, how they had managed to throw her out of her own home, and how she had died. He was bitter and angry about gogo. How she had died and how people just grabbed everything and left him stranded. He was bitter and angry at life itself, because it had always been unfair to him. He thought of his mother. A poor, fragile and frustrated woman. It was the divorce that had finished her off. It was bitter and painful. Cain's mother had refused to grant his father the divorce and was even prepared to share him with other women, Abel's mother included. But Abel's mother wouldn't hear of that, she wanted everything for herself. She was not prepared to share. It was either her or Cain's mother. His father made his choice and threw Cain's mother out of the matrimonial home. That very same day, Cain's mother hanged herself from a tree in the township park and two weeks later they dumped Cain at his grandmother's homestead.

The toad got up from the crossing, walked back to the bottle store where he returned the empties and got his deposit back. After that he left and went to see Molly. She was behind the counter. He stopped in front of her and she offered him a smile. She had a pretty face and a pretty smile too.

"Molly, what would I have to do to marry you?" he asked, looking straight at her. She laughed and fiddled with the till. A shy village girl. Cain knew she would make a good wife.

"You are drunk," she told him.

"No. I'm not," he said. He wanted to tell her how much she reminded him of his own mother. Fragile and innocent looking.

"You don't want to get married to a poor, fat, ugly toad like me, is that so?" he asked. He wasn't angry and his voice was low. Molly felt embarrassed and uneasy. She laughed and shook her head.

“You are fine the way you are, Cain. And women don’t marry guys just because they are handsome. Marriage demands more,” she said, sounding so mature and so knowledgeable, like a marriage counsellor. Cain smiled at her, took some money from his pockets and gave it to her. Ten fifty thousand dollar notes. It was a lot of money.

“Buy yourself something nice. You are a good woman,” he said. She wanted to say no, but he was already at the door, disappearing.

Cain walked away thinking about the insults and the ill-treatment he had suffered at the hands of Abel, Abel’s mother and his father. Particularly painful were the memories of Abel provoking him into fights. In the middle of the fights, Amai Abel would appear from nowhere to side with her son. They would team up against him, Amai Abel holding him by his hands while Abel hit him in the face until he bled. When he started bleeding they would stop. Cain would be ordered to go and clean up the mess on his face. Twice they had broken his nose and twice he had ended up at the clinic.

Cain remembered walking in the streets after one such fight, sobbing, small colourless drops of pain, anger and frustration washing over his chubby face. These incidents, scattered as they were, sharpened his anger. Like a mother nursing her only child, Cain nursed his anger, groomed it and watched it grow into bitter and blind hatred. This hatred followed him everywhere. It became his friend, his companion.

He walked past the railway crossing, past the Cape of Good Rest Funeral Parlour, where the song he had heard earlier on walked with him until he disappeared towards the residential areas. It was Tuesday. Friday was just days away.

The next day, Cain waited at Sango’s bottle store until the train from Harare to Bulawayo passed through and, as it did, he glanced at his Japanese made wristwatch. It was exactly 10.50 pm. He bought his last beer, downed it and left. The metal trolley was still under the tree. He passed by, stroking it with a lover’s passion, and headed into the darkness.

Abel had to die and killing him would be the knockout punch that would finally put a genuine smile on Cain’s face. The ultimate revenge. Cain even imagined how his parents would receive the news of Abel’s death, how they would react. Their world would come tumbling down and Cain loved that thought. Friday was just around the corner, he kept telling himself.

On Thursday he was at Sango’s again, drinking until the train passed by and, as it raced towards the station, he looked at his watch. 10.55 pm. He was about to stand up and go home when Molly came in. She had just

knocked off. She walked over to him and, without hesitating, asked him to take her home. Cain swallowed hard. He had not expected that. He stood up and led her out. In the dark Molly took his hand and started playing with it. Cain's heart was racing, pounding. He didn't know what to do or what to say. He shouldn't have worried. Molly talked until they were standing outside her place. They stopped. Molly let go his hand.

"I just wanted to say thank you for the money. I used it for my rent," she said. Cain wanted to say something, but a lump had developed in his throat and he couldn't say a word. Molly thanked him again and rushed inside.

Friday came. There was nothing special about it. It was another ordinary day. Abel found Cain waiting for him at the bus stop. As the two brothers exchanged superficial greetings, it would have been difficult for any bystander watching them to guess that the two were in fact brothers. The two were as different as a gazelle and hippopotamus. While Cain was a bullfrog, Abel was every woman's dream. He had the look of a glossy magazine model; a body that could have turned Olympic athletes green with envy and a smile plucked right out of Eddie Murphy's face. As the two walked back home, Abel had that air of superiority and contentedness only worn by those that are so sure where they are going. Whether it was done consciously or not Cain could not tell, but he noticed it and his loathing for Abel suddenly rushed to the surface.

The brothers spent the day together and tried hard to entertain each other. They were good actors. They joked and laughed like long lost friends. That afternoon Cain discovered a side of his brother he never knew existed. Abel was a joker, a natural comedian. He could tell a good joke when he wanted. Good clean jokes. When the sun was going down, Cain suggested they take a walk. They ended up at Sango's where they ordered drinks. Time flew. Soon it was dark. They were getting drunk.

Abel took a small envelope from his back pocket and handed it to Cain. Though the envelope was small, it was heavy. There was something hard inside. Cain shook the envelope, trying to figure out what it contained.

"Don't open it until we get home," Abel said, downing another glass of *Castle Lager*. Cain held the envelope and tried to imagine what it contained. Half drunk, his mind refused to concentrate.

"What is it?" He was trying not to get excited.

"You'll find out when you get home. Let's drink."

They went back to their beers.

At exactly 10.35 pm, Cain stood up and suggested they go home. Abel

grumbled drunkenly. Cain lifted him and staggered out with him. Abel protested feebly, but Cain paid no attention. He walked to the tree, found the trolley, placed Abel inside and started pushing it away from Sango's.

The night was still, save for barely audible insect noises. The jukebox had packed up the day before. The street lamp was faulty and threw out a dim light. Cain, half drunk, pushed the trolley past the street lamp. He was now singing and Abel was asleep, snoring noisily in the trolley. At the railway crossing Cain stopped and glanced nervously at his watch. 10.55 pm. Where the hell was the train? Cain wanted to scream. Then the robot turned red and he heard the train whistle. His heart started pounding and his hands became clammy with sweat. Moments later the lights appeared as the metal snake rounded its final curve towards the station. Cain, like a chess player making his final winning move, pushed the trolley into the middle of the railway tracks, turned and started running.

The train driver saw the trolley but it was too late to do anything. All he could do was blow his horn and try the brakes. There was no way the train was going to stop. It was not a small car or a commuter omnibus. It was a train. It hit the trolley, instantly crushing it, then dragged it along until it came to a halt....

In the dark Cain ran. He ran until his heart would not allow him to run anymore. He stopped, took a deep breath and started walking. He had to get away, get as far away as possible, but first the envelope. He took it out and ripped it open. There was a small note and something wrapped tightly inside. He opened it to find keys. Three keys. What game had Abel been up to? Keys? Keys for what? He opened the note and, with trembling hands, started reading.

Dear Cain

My big brother. I know how much you hate me. You have every right to. But I just hope one day you'll learn to let go and forgive. No single day passes without me thinking about you and what you went through. My only defence is that I was young and didn't know what I was doing. As for Mother and our Father, I don't know their reasons. They are the ones who can tell you. Cain, I have enclosed keys to a house I bought you in Harare. It's a good house. You'll love it. I want you to come and live in Harare, near us. We are a family and we should start behaving like one.

The note ended. It was signed Abel.

Sonnet with One Unstated Line

John Eppel

See the shambling gait of the unemployed,
the vacant stare of the dispossessed;
the plastic bags by breezes buoyed
or, when evening settles, at rest.
Hear the cry of hornbills lost in yards
of rubble and rags, to split the ears
of those who stand and watch; and the guards
unguarded, hammering, hammering.
Smell the blood and mucous, ashes damp;
breath of birds turned children clamouring,
children clamouring. A tyrant's stamp:
a boot, a fist, a fourteen pounder:
come and witness our city flounder.

Your Burden

Farai Mpofu

You cannot hear the purple petals singing lullabies to you. They are floating in the air as they fall from the green canopy onto the hospital's red painted corrugated iron roofs. They fall like small babies spinning in air and land everywhere forming a fluorescent purple carpet. The hospital is a block of old whitewashed buildings and has a sterile cleanliness. In one of the wards is you. You are staring into nothingness. You do not seem to notice the row of beds, the piano at the corner and other patients who are lost in their own slurred worlds. You cannot see the bees and butterflies flying outside your window and working on the jacarandas' purple flowers. You are like a cabbage - feeling useless. You are nothing.

You can cut a huge piece of it, like a cake, and enjoy it with a steaming mug of coffee on a winter night. It is thick and alive, breathing into your eardrums. It whispers threats to you and bays for your blood. All you can do is hide underneath the hospital sheets and anti-depressants. It is your sadistic companion that feeds on your masochism. Holding a sledgehammer and crushing your head into pulp and yet it seems to need you. It is you... you drift to the island of death as it carries you like the sea. The clock is ticking, time is passing, you are trapped in a sealed cardboard box. Struggling for breath, screaming, waiting for the monster, your fear, to carry you into the abyss of hallucinations and confusion.

They have sedated you because you were wild. As wild as a rabid hyena in the darkness of the savannah wilderness. Walking hideously through the corridors of the hospital. Snarling and savagely attacking your prey. Drooling. Life has become an intricate embroidery of nightmares and reality. There is no distinction between reality and illusion. Yesterday you could not sleep, the voices wanted to kill you, they were laughing scornfully, they touched your breasts and you screamed. Then the nurses called the psychiatrist - a beautiful middle-aged Russian woman. She smiled kindly, fine jewellery hanging from her ears, neck, wrists and fingers. She told you everything was going to be okay. But you sat in that corner, your pyjamas wet with urine and faeces, crying like a child crying for mama. Then you felt the creepy crawlies, crawling underneath your skin, like thousands of huge worms. Just moving. You scratched yourself until you were bleeding. Your hair was twirling and you could not sit down. You removed your clothes and

walked naked, your bosom heaving from side to side like Big Ben's oscillators. You sat and cried like a baby. It was the fear talking to you, laughing, and making you cry. Crying for mama.

It is like a bottle of coca-cola that is smashed onto a wall. Exploding into small sharp fragments that look like expensive gems. The mixture of glass and soda foam. The voices kept nagging for answers. Accusing and shouting at you to take a rope and hang yourself in the bathroom. Telling you to drink rat poison and get numb, dead. It is like smashing glass and coca-cola. The smell of drugs, the syringes, the milk-white nurses uniforms, the shiny vinyl tiled floors and clean neatly ironed bed sheets. But you sit there and look like a cornered stray dog. The fear has conquered all the citadels of your mind. You feel useless.

You are like a plastic bag carried into the turbulence of a tropical storm. Twisted and turned over and over until you feel dizzy. You are floating in a vacuum next to swarms of blood suckling bats, rotting human torsos. It is like a roller coaster ride or going six feet into your grave – perishing and rotting. Never to exist again. You feel vulnerable like a dog lying in the middle of a city highway after being crushed by a haulage truck.

The pastor, the one who steals his congregation's tithes and contributions, the one who fucks people's wives during his praying rounds, came and prayed for you. He said he would cleanse you of the evil spirits haunting your soul. He was fighting the demons, attacking Lucifer the Lord of Darkness. He prayed until his white designer suit was wet with sweat. He held the violent conviction that he would win. But you stared into his eyes and laughed at him. They all said you were possessed by the devil. The rumour mongers were happy. They spread the rumours and enjoyed your misery. It made them forget the grinding poverty, the AIDS, the power cuts, the raw sewage, the uncollected rubbish mountains, the sadness... the dictatorship.

They gave up and called the faith healer to come and prophesy. He was wearing a black gown with a conspicuous red cross on his abdomen. He confirmed all the rumours. The faith healer was carrying ten litres of seawater and tried to make you drink them but you spat the bitter water in his face. He prayed in strange tongues and saw the darkness. He said he saw the house of stone, Zimbabwe, and its springs of blood. He saw the frogs, the cureless disease and the locusts with vampire heads. He saw the hunger. Then he watched you going deeper into the madness, never to return. Disillusioned, he packed his things and left and never came back.

You are laughing hysterically, under observation. Twenty-four hour surveillance. The fear is growing like a horrible cancer in your brain. You carry the burden; you think you are the chosen one. They do not understand you, they think you have gone nuts. But you know it is the fear. You feel like an asthmatic, forced to work in a pigsty on a rainy day. Waiting for twelve years for the sun to come up. But all is in vain. You cry for *Jehovah Shalom* but he is silent. You cry out for deliverance and feel like a soldier in the middle of a trench watching his comrade dying from a biological weapon attack. There is a school in the iris of your mind. Whitewashed, with smelly toilets, a compulsory Sunday mass. There is choking incense, altar wine, rape and hypocritical solemn church hymns. You cry yourself to sleep.

You try to forget the cult. The school was a prison - a mental hell. It corroded your sanity. You look like a worm. Wet, sweaty, and living with the fear. You feel like driftwood floating towards your destiny. All wet and salty. Carrying the burden, androgynous, and blinded by the ash and dust. Humanity cut your heart into pieces, fried and ate them. Only the darkness is your companion. You are crazy. You are useless.

The Concert

Mzana Mthimkhulu

Had I decided to go into music, the world would never have heard of Joseph Shabalala and his Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Mother says long before I could talk, my singing talent shone out like the sun on a cloudless day. Just my babble used to persuade all around to sit up and savour the musical sounds coming out of my mouth. I admit, my two elder sisters Khethiwe and Zandile were never bowled over by my talent. Khethiwe even complained that my voice grated on her ears, that I always sang out of tune. I forgave them. Even as a six year old, I understood that not all ears had the ability to recognize and appreciate talent.

My singing career started that morning our class teacher stormed into the classroom bubbling with excitement. “You won’t believe this, class,” Mrs Malumo gushed, pacing up and down the cement floor. Gone was her usual calm and measured manner. Her high-pitched delivery was accentuated by flamboyant gestures. I feared that, at any second, her slim body would burst asunder with the excitement. “I have just convinced the headmaster that even though you are Grade 1, you will do our school proud if you take part in the coming fund raising concert.”

“Wow!” we all exclaimed. The concert was the highlight of the year in the school’s calendar. We had all looked forward to it until the deputy headmaster announced at assembly that Grade 1 pupils were too young to go on stage on such an important occasion. Head thrown back and eyes half shut, the deputy explained that our role was to clap hands and cheer the stars on the night. The choir he conducted was going to be the star attraction.

“Yes class,” a smiling Mrs Malumo nodded. “Forget what the deputy head said, you are in, you will open the concert.” We clapped hands for our leader. She had accomplished a seemingly impossible task. Single-handed, she had entered the lion’s den. On our behalf she had fought and won a titanic battle. Not only were we in; the opening act was ours.

For a moment, she stood still, basking in our adoration and beaming us a smile. The smile suddenly vanished from her face and was replaced by a serious expression. “Class, we will show the whole school and township that we are the best.”

“Yes we will,” we chorused. Some even banged their desks.

“Though the concert is a month away, we start preparing now. Let us

sing the song *uLobengula wayebusa ngegazi*. One, two, three - begin.”

Along with the rest of the class, I attacked the song with gusto. Our shrill voices filled up the classroom. After two verses, Mrs Malumo stopped us by raising her hands. “I am afraid not all of you sing well. My ears picked up a number of sour notes. Only those with angelic voices will make it into the final choir. Between now and the concert, I will weed out all those whose voices do not merge with the rest of the choir.”

At her signal we resumed singing. Then, horror of horrors, Mrs Malumo ambled along the row next to the windows. I sat at the back of the row. Her hands were crossed behind her back, palms out. She stopped at each bench and craned her long neck to listen to each and every pupil. The glint in her eye was like that of a butcher walking among a herd of cattle from which he is about to pick his next kill.

To my dismay she stopped longer at the third bench where my friend Adam sat. “You are out,” she decreed, touching Adam on the shoulder. Adam slouched on the bench with disappointment. Mrs Malumo moved on, as if she had done nothing more than squash a bothersome mosquito. If this were a fair world, her coming nearer would have not alarmed me. After all, my voice was faultless. But what if Mrs Malumo’s ears, like my sisters’, were faulty? Would it be fair for me to be weeded out? Of course not. An idea hit me. I was going to move my lips and tongue in time with the song, make all the facial expressions of one who was singing, but no sound would come out. Years later, the trick would be called lip-syncing. Today, it is an endless source of pride for me that I lip-synced before the term was coined.

Mrs Malumo paused next to me and cocked her head in my direction. I lip-synced. My silence must have merged well with the rest of the class, for she smiled approvingly before proceeding. By the end of this first session, three pupils had been weeded out.

A month later, from a class of forty-five, thirty of us made it to the final choir.

Mother was proud of my achievement. She stopped my sister Khethiwe from ironing my khaki uniform and personally took over my preparations for the big night. “Any fly which dares to land on the creases of your uniform will be cut into two,” she said pointing to knife-edge creases she had ironed on my shorts. Father wanted to attend the concert but he was on night shift.

Never before was Beit Hall packed the way it was on the concert night. All the chairs were taken up. Many stood along the walls and at the back. Outside, the car parking space was full. The township councillor was the

guest of honour. Dorothy Masuka, the diva and Khethiwe's idol, was one of the three judges. The best choir was going to walk away with a glittering trophy.

I swelled with pride as I and the rest of the Grade 1 class climbed up the steps to go on stage. Mrs Malumo was resplendent in her green costume and matching accessories. We huddled together in a crescent shape facing Mrs Malumo. I briefly took my eyes off her to look at the crowd. To my surprise and delight, I spotted father sitting next to mother in the front row. I later found out that a work-mate had agreed to swap shifts with father so that he would not miss the big night.

After getting the key from a mouth organ, Mrs Malumo signalled us to sing. I was not going to deny such a large and distinguished audience the pleasure of my special voice, so I sang louder than usual. For some reason, every pupil had decided to raise his or her voice. My voice was drowned in the mediocrity of the rest of the choir. I raised my voice in the next line. So did every choir member. By the end of the first verse, we were all vying to out shout each other. The struggle for supremacy showed in our contorted faces.

The audience loved it. They rocked with laughter, clapped their hands, cheered and whistled. Mother wiped tears of laughter from her cheeks and almost fell off her chair. Strangely, our success in entertaining the crowd unsettled Mrs Malumo. Confusion and shock showed in her face. As conductor, she tried to slow us down and get us to lower our voices. But no one could stop us now. We were a run-away express train. We even performed the song's war dance with more enthusiasm than usual.

More cheers accompanied us as we descended the steps and sat down. I barely heard the rest of the performers. How could I when I was busy reliving our triumphant performance? With an ear-to-ear smile, I recalled every second from the time we ascended the steps to the time we came back. I did notice though when my two sisters went up on stage. Sporting a freshly dry cleaned suit, and his head glittering with too much hair cream, the deputy head led them up. He was their choirmaster. Their singing was subdued, boring and unimaginative. Except for their mouths, the choir members did not move any part of their bodies. One could be forgiven for thinking they were statues. Throughout their long rendition, all their eyes remained fixed on the choirmaster. At the end, the deputy head turned round to face the audience and bowed. The audience gave them less than half the cheers it had bombarded us with. No whistles were wasted on them.

At long last, the rest of the performances came to an end. “Ladies and gentlemen,” the head teacher addressed us. “While the judges are putting final touches to their assessments, we will have more entertainment. The judges have all agreed that the Grade 1 class is in a class of its own and therefore will not be part of the competition. May the class please come forward to entertain us for a few minutes.” A thunderous applause greeted the invitation. We ran up the steps for the encore. This time, even the fifteen weeded out classmates joined us. To our amazement, Mrs Malumo did not accompany us. She remained glued to her chair looking down and shaking her head slowly. Perhaps modesty forbade her to be associated with such run away success.

Without Mrs Malumo to restrain our activities, we dispensed with the practice of huddling together like chickens in the rain. Instead, we spread ourselves across the stage. This gave each of us plenty of room to do justice to the war dance. Mrs Malumo had stressed that our war dance be controlled and decent. For us, this had sucked out a lot of fun from the dance. But the fear of being ejected from the choir had silenced us.

Now that we were doing the final performance, there was no threat of being weeded out. Mrs Malumo’s watchful eye was way down there. We stamped the floor as real warriors. Even the girls’ stamping was ferocious. As for the singing, none of us wanted to risk having his or her voice drowned by others. The loud voices we started with never flagged. For the finale, we stabbed our imaginary enemies, flew back and landed on our buttocks yelling “*qhethu*.” How we enjoyed tumbling over each other! This time the audience sprang to their feet, ululated, whistled and stamped the floor. We were simply the best.

“Did you notice that the cheers were louder after we so called weeds rejoined the choir?” Adam shouted into my ear as we left the stage. Nodding my head, I put my arm around his shoulders. There was enough credit to spread around all of us. A further feather in my cap came when the results were announced. My sisters’ choir failed to make it to the top three. The deputy head stormed out of the hall in a huff, leaving behind his shell-shocked choir.

Once the formalities were over, we all stood up and started mingling. Even members of the winning choir did not enjoy the kind of attention showered on us. Their highest point had been the brief moment when they lifted the trophy. Compare and contrast that with us. In addition to the thunderous applause we had garnered on stage, scores of admirers now

jostled with one another just to shake our hands and pat our backs. Dorothy Masuka bent down to hug me. “You were sweet,” she chimed. I luxuriated in her soft body and exotic perfume. Khethiwe shot me an envious look. I enjoyed her look almost as much as I did the hug. Dorothy moved on to make room for my many admirers. My parents had to drag me away from my fans.

“So much for your beautiful voices,” I mocked my sisters as we approached a street light on our way home. “Not even a consolation prize, let alone a hug from Dorothy. Would you like a hug from a star performer so that part of Dorothy’s glamour rubs off on you?”

“Huh,” Khethiwe snorted, “your class performance was so pathetic that it could not even be classified.”

“Pathetic?” I screamed. “How come then the audience cheered and demanded an encore?”

She stopped and put her hand on her hip. “Pure sympathy, young brother. Sympathy for kids who chanted a nursery rhyme when the rest of us were singing real songs. Complicated compositions with twists and difficult transitions.”

Mother came to my rescue. “The true value of music is assessed by the appreciation of its audience.”

“But Mother...”

“Quiet Khethiwe,” I admonished her. “An elder has spoken.” She sulked and looked away. Later, I jeered my sisters right into the night.

With my overflowing talent and good looks, my place in the music business was guaranteed. But the thought of eclipsing Dorothy did not appeal to me. So I forwent the glamour of showbiz and settled for a career in banking. Today, thirty years after the concert, I still run into members of our triumphant Grade 1 choir. We smile and nod to each other, recalling the night we were the undisputed kings and queens of choral music.

Butterflies Drift into the Edges of our City Life

John S. Read

Butterflies drift into the edges of our city life
where thorn shrubs still catch our feet.
Amongst fresh paint and partial fences
alights an iridescent *intombi* in Emganwini
with diamonds on the wings of her soul
bright Bata-clad in steps that sing
of sale-price satisfaction, but caught within
a reggae'd chorus of etiolated young men.

When released from their fragmented attention
she dances a rapid soft-shoe shuffle in flight,
giving delight to attendant scrap-ball kids.
But her deft steps send their ball off bounds
knocking nuts flying from a wayside stand.
Urchins dive and pockets fill with these scattered prizes.
Leaving this crestfallen, nascent butterfly of Emganwini
to placate MaMthombeni with her last remaining note.

The Ambulance

Catherine Buckle

It had become something of a ritual for the neighbourhood to stop and watch the ambulance go boiling up the hill. There had been no fuel for nine months and so the sight of any passing car caused interest, but the ambulance, its passenger and the way the vehicle tore up the hill, made everyone stop and look.

The rains had started three weeks later than normal this year and, when the first storm finally came, it was angry and very destructive, it was the only way to break that searing, suicidal heat. It was one of those storms where the wind wrenched the trees from side to side, the lightning streaked up and down the sky leaving fluorescent lines burnt into your eyes and the rain pelted down in thick grey sheets. The noise of the storm was overpowering and dominant, nothing could happen while it raged, its intensity demanded attention. The old story that mothers told their frightened children to explain the thunder, the one that said God was moving the furniture around upstairs, didn't work for this storm. The usual thundery rumble was a roar in this storm, it crashed and shook and banged in the skies overhead. Two inches of rain, fifty millimetres, fell in just half an hour and, when it was over, the neighbourhood sat in silent shock, or was it blessed relief, getting its breath back. Life began again about ten minutes after the storm had finished, when the last of the thunder had stopped, and the first birds sang out tentatively, their clear whistles piercing the quiet after the storm. The smell of wet earth, washed trees and clean air soon tempted the people of the neighbourhood outside to see what the storm had done.

Everywhere the torrential rain had dug gullies into the parched ground as it raced away, too fast to soak in, just running. The streams of rain water, heavy with debris, topsoil and sand from the roads, gurgled and bubbled hurriedly down to the lowest points. In some places, where the road was steep, the noise of the streaming runoff was almost like a waterfall. The trees, bushes, lampposts and rooftops dripped and the drops were heavy and cold. The air temperature had fallen by almost ten degrees with the storm and the sun was still smothered in low, grey storm clouds. At the bottom of the hill sheets of water were settling and then separating, the liquid slowly trickling away and leaving behind a two-inch thick carpet of sand. In every dip and depression, water settled into chocolate brown puddles topped with

big muddy bubbles.

First to emerge, skipping and giggling, were the raggedy children, the pair who lived with their teenage mum and her newest born baby in the dark wooden house. Some people politely called it a 'cabin', but really it was a dark, mosquito infested, prefabricated wooden shed. It was at the back of the plot behind piles of stones and bricks, which had stood alongside the foundation for five years. The money to erect the building had run out, the owners were gone, temporarily abroad, to earn 'real money' and to wait for the time when things changed in Zimbabwe. The woman and her kids, and sometimes, for a night or two, her husband, were the guardians of the building site. From a distance the children, a boy and a girl, looked like sweet, innocent, happy kids with smiling faces but, when you got closer, you saw the sores around their mouths, the mucous at their noses and the tinge of orange in their hair – the colour of malnutrition. There was no reading, writing and arithmetic for these kids, their days were filled with fetching buckets of water for mum, collecting sticks for the fire and looking for things to add to the supper pot: berries, insects and baby birds. For the barefoot kids in their thin clothes, the storm had bought relief – they would not have to carry buckets of water for the little vegetable garden or walk far for firewood as it lay strewn on the roads, twigs, sticks and branches brought down by the wind and rain.

Next to appear were the people who worked on little plots of land at the roadside. They had been late starting this year because of the announcements by the government. 'Urban cultivating is illegal' had been the message and for weeks the whispering had been widespread. Some people were sure the government would send the bulldozers to destroy the roadside plots – the way they had torn down shacks, sheds, market stalls and even brick houses in Zimbabwe's man-made tsunami, the one called Murambatsvina. Some said that when the maize, beans and pumpkins were thriving and flowering, the government men would come with knapsack sprayers filled with chemicals and they would destroy the crops. But as the rain got nearer and the prices of food just kept getting higher and higher, the desperate need to plant a few seeds became overwhelming. Everywhere people threw caution to the wind. They stopped listening to the whispered warnings and, day after day, they came at dawn and stayed till after dusk - men, women and children, toiling on the roadsides, digging up little strips and planting food.

The gravediggers were next to appear. They emerged from the little green shack at the cemetery to see what damage the storm had done to their

line of newly dug graves. There was work for them every day now; it was the same in towns and cities all across Zimbabwe. Life expectancy had plummeted to just over 30 years and AIDS was taking a devastating toll, culling thousands every month. The gravediggers came early in the morning and worked till late in the evening. They were forced to stop working at least twice a day, whenever a funeral was in progress. Lately the gravediggers had taken to cultivating little plots of maize while the mourners were drumming, ululating and sobbing at another precious young life extinguished. Ninety percent of the graves were occupied by people in their twenties and thirties. An entire generation was being buried; the pain of it all was beyond words.

Taking advantage of the newly softened ground following the rain storm, people started working immediately, clearing, digging, planting. Suddenly, the quiet of the newly washed neighbourhood was shattered by the sound of an approaching vehicle. It was the ambulance.

Aha! She was coming home.

People looked at each other with knowing smiles and stopped to watch. Women rested their hoes; gravediggers leaned on their shovels and men stood still with their little bowls of seed. The children who were collecting sticks, investigating dislodged birds' nests and throwing stones into the puddles ran giggling to the side of the road, making sure they were well out of the way.

When the people of the neighbourhood had first seen the ambulance a fortnight ago they assumed the obvious: someone must be critically ill. Talking in whispers, asking neighbours, watching which house the ambulance was going to, waiting to see which member of the neighbourhood was in trouble. The ambulance had been driving fast, far too fast, bucking and roaring over the gullies, banging heavily into potholes. For sure, the neighbours assumed, someone must be very ill. The ambulance had stopped outside a house and a nurse in uniform emerged. But the nurse had not been coming to get a patient, she lived here and the ambulance was just bringing her home. She was, after all, not just any old nurse. She was the senior nurse and, if she needed or wanted the ambulance to bring her home in the afternoon or take her to work in the morning, then that is what she would have.

The sight of the ambulance roaring up the hill became a familiar sight in the hard working neighbourhood. Because she was in the ambulance, the nurse did not have to see or talk to the snotty nosed, barefoot children when they came out of the wooden shack. She did not have to see the patches of

scabies sprouting on their legs, arms and bare buttocks. The nurse did not have to smell the piles of rotting garbage that had been dumped on the roadsides uncollected for weeks at a time. The nurse sat, staring straight ahead, as the ambulance bucked and roared up the eroded road; she was, after all, the senior nurse in the government hospital.

When the ambulance had gone, no one said anything, words were not necessary, eyes spoke volumes and everyone got back to work.

Paying to Die

Ignatius Mabasa

Dying is not easy. That probably explains why some end up killing themselves violently. Death has a bad habit of sniffing at you, going round in circles, sizing you up and, just when you think it's going to swallow you, it pees on you and walks away.

Death has spat at me several times. I think it is the spirit that I hear God breathed in us when he created man that makes it hard to die. I think we can only die when the person who breathed his breath in us wants us to die. Whenever death comes for me, I wake up to find myself with acres and more acres of this life to live. I should be in the *Guinness Book of Records* for having more lives than a cat.

I have diagnosed myself as HIV positive so many times. I have looked at my face in the mirror and seen things that made me conclude I have AIDS and I am going to die soon. Yet, I have never had the guts to go and get tested. Instead, I seem to have decided to help the disease that I believe is there, by living carelessly.

I have spent countless nights in the open. It has helped me admire God's power when he hung the stars so high. I have spent nights in places and houses I don't know, only to ask myself too many questions the following day. I try to retrace my footsteps so as to understand how I ended up there, but all efforts are blurred by a memory rendered useless by beer. If I try to think hard, I then begin to feel someone trapped inside me piloting my life in directions that I would not have sanctioned. This someone fights me so that he lives my life for me.

This morning I woke up and found myself in bed in a strange room with a strange woman whose face looked like Munch's painting *The Scream*. I tried to reconstruct how I got in her room. All I remember is myself in a state of inebriation trying to make my way through the people who were on the dance floor in the night club. I recall a woman glistening with sweat, with a heavy smell of cheap flea market perfume asking me to dance with her. Could she be the same woman I am in bed with now? I am blank. My mind can't think. I have a dull but heavy headache. I am groggy.

The light in the Munch woman's room is weak. I can feel her breath soft and moist on my left shoulder. My thigh itches and I slide my hand down to

pacify the itch. I discover that I am naked. My heart throbs. Not again. I pray that I am just naked but did not do anything with this woman. Not another STI. More antibiotics and long lectures from the nursing sisters at the clinic. I curse myself. I curse the beer I drank. I curse month end, which brings payday.

I shift and the bed creaks. I sleep on my right side. I yawn. I see a faded blue door – the only door in and out of this room. The door has tiny cracks where the wood lengths were joined which let small shafts of light filter in from outside. I see a thin wardrobe standing in one corner. It looks like a scared person whose back is against the wall hoping some impending danger will just miss him. Next to me, too close to the bed, is a small trolley with a one plate stove perched on some old newspapers. There is an unwashed pot that shows some sadza was hurriedly cooked in it. A cooking stick is dipping its head into the pot. A lid sits clumsily on the pot. Cockroaches are feasting on the dried sadza that is on the lid and the cooking stick.

I suddenly feel angry with the cockroaches. They are free and happy. I think of the days when I was a lay preacher and ask myself – have I become like Legion in the Bible who lived in the graveyard, living a life that pleased the spirits that possessed him? Why do I do the things I don't want, things I regret later? Why am I here, naked in bed with a prostitute?

A female cockroach looks at me from the edge of the dirty pot sitting on the stove. It has stopped feeding and suddenly looks serious. The cockroach look unsettles me. Then the brown creature slowly shakes her tiny head as if pitying me. Then without warning, she opens her mouth and asks, "Is this why you dumped Chiedza? To be in places like this and sell your soul?"

"Where do you know her from? I did not dump her." I protest.

"So what happened?" The roach asks almost sweetly.

"I just got tired of the affair. She wanted me to be accountable for everything."

"I thought accountability was a virtue."

I can't answer her. After a pause I say, "She also wanted a lot of things."

"Like what?" The roach continues in a melancholic voice.

"It is hard to say." I feel trapped.

"What's hard? She loved you and all she wanted from you was for you to find time for her so that she could know and understand you better, but you thought she was becoming like a private investigator."

"But I try to be good. The problem is the person who is trapped inside me who tells me to sit when I want to stand."

“What are you trying to say?” The roach asks.

“Someone is piloting my life.”

The roach shakes her head. “Who else could live your life for you? Your life is in your hands. Life is about choices.”

I don’t answer. She has a point, but it makes me angry.

“Anger is a weakness. Try to get rid of anger and think clearly. Anger is a storm that destroys.”

So she can see through me.

“Why are you here? The last time you did this you got an STI and you were full of regret and told yourself that it would never happen again. You always tell yourself it will be the last time, but you go back to your vomit like a dog.”

I feel cornered. I am wary of being angry because she will pick it up. I don’t say a thing. I close my eyes and open them hoping to find her gone.

“Why do you live a lie?”

“I am trying to be good, but think I am under some bad spell?” I blurt.

“And then what happens? Trying is not good enough, especially when you do not commit yourself. What would Chiedza say if she were to find you here now? Was she not patient with you, waiting, hoping you would change and be open and show love?”

“So what must I do?” I ask without thinking.

“Why ask me? I don’t have answers to your life because it is in your hands. You are the one who drinks yourself silly as if that is what life is all about.” She speaks slowly, emphasising each syllable.

A wave of anger crashes on me and I am blind.

“I think you are getting too big for your boots,” I say, pointing a finger with a dirty overgrown nail. “My life is not your life, so leave me alone.”

“I never said I want to live your life for you. Isn’t it that you say there is someone doing that already? It is too crowded in there for me to come in.”

“Shut up, you fool!” I scream.

“You are a human being, I am not, I am just a cockroach living on leftovers.”

I sigh. I feel an itch between my legs. If I had the guts, I would go and get tested for HIV so that I could confront what I imagine. Maybe I will be found negative. Then I will start a new life. I smile and tell myself what I want to hear and believe it.

“Now you are talking!” the cockroach says.

I had forgotten about her. I look at her and feel I must silence her

forever.

With one swift karate move I saw on TV, I smash her and she dies exposing whitish entrails. Only her legs twitch in defiance.

I feel sick. I get out of the creaky bed and dress. I reach for the door, and the scream woman asks in a guttural voice, "Where is my money?"

Paying to die. I fish out some crumpled notes from my jacket that I toss at her without counting.

She says something, but I am already outside. It is still dark but the tower lights are still at work. I don't know where I am going. I just stagger on to the street and start walking.

I meet a mangy dog with shiny eyes. He looks at me and laughs, "Still looking for death?"

I don't answer. Instead, I laugh with him, but my laughter is empty, it's like a slimy hole, a naked laughter.

Hands

Mary Ndlovu

The aging man studied his long bony fingers. The drying, tough skin stretched ever more tenuously across them, revealing little about the use to which he had put them over the decades. Could these be the same hands that urgently pulled the she-goat's teats in the dawn of a chilly winter morning? That swung the sjambok against the sweating flanks of the ox-team, caressed the breasts of a lover, and pulled the trigger of the AK more times than he wanted to count? Yes, not only pulled the trigger, but dismantled and reassembled the weapon, oiled it, cleaned it, stood it at the ready while he slept, and finally surrendered it when the war was over. It had once been his constant companion, had voiced for him his hatred, his fear, his hope, ambitions and dreams of future freedom. With it his younger hands had come alive, their purpose clear, a flame burning.

The creak of the sitting room door disturbed his reverie, reminding him that he had still to repair it. "Baba, I'm going out now, I'll be back in the evening."

"Where are you going? One of your useless meetings again? What do you think you will achieve, talking, talking? Like bees buzzing who don't produce honey. And your hands waving in the air, useless as your tongue.

"Why can't you young people just get on with some work? You won't get anywhere with meetings. All the education we gave you has made you soft in the head, afraid of your own shadows. We faced all the hardships of the bush, risked everything, now you waste it."

"No, Baba, it's not like that. We're trying to solve our problems; it's not easy."

"What problems? We brought you independence. We worked hard, suffered in the bush month after month, year after year. Now you think you must just enjoy it without working yourselves. We've even given you the land, and you can't produce anything on it. All you talk about are problems, problems, as if you want a life without struggle. A life of brains only and no hands."

He absorbed his father's tirade as he had done many times before, and turned to go; but he worried that a storm was brewing. What if he got caught? His father would never understand. He couldn't seem to get out from behind his gun and look around to see what was happening. As if he

was just emerging from the bush twenty-five years ago.

The door banged with another creak, and the old man was alone again. Alone with his interminable thoughts. He was proud of the role he played in liberation, a foot soldier feared and respected by his comrades; but since then life had lost its shine. He did not want to admit that family life bored him. Yes, MaNgwenya was a good wife, attended to all his needs, kept the house well and always showed the necessary respect; his children were obedient, never troublesome like some others. But something was missing, and when he felt the vacuum, the restlessness drove him to the company of comrades at the beer hall, where, through an Ingwebu-Madison haze, they could relive the past, regain a purpose, become alive.

Despite the bravado, there was something bothering him, lying just under the surface of his consciousness, touching a yet-to-be-discovered nerve. It was that vacuum again, that restlessness. Maybe it would have been better if the war had never ended. At least in the bush there was something to dream for, something to imagine.

But now? What had he really achieved since demobilisation? Years of confusion, drifting, avoiding arrest in the sweeps by the Fifth Brigade. Then finally, a mediocre job in a security company, a family, a two-bedroomed house in Nkulumane, a sputtering skorokoro, and a small herd at the family homestead that he could not even afford to visit any more. And he was getting old. Was this what he fought for? What about the dreams – of farms, trucks, herds of cattle to match Lobengula's. And what about his children? Bongani the only one around, the others struggling in Johannesburg, denying their pedigree, paying any money to be seen as a South African, not a Zimbabwean.

When he was that age, how proud he had been when he finally reached Zambia, after the tough trek through the forest and the dangerous Zambezi crossing. How disappointed at the long wait for training, how impatient to get back home into action, to use the gun, and keep it always by his side. He could still feel the exhilaration of his first 'kill' and the wrench in his gut when he discovered that his victim had been not the white reservist but a terrified black recruit. He would never forget the distorted face, the accusing, pleading eyes as that boy died in agony. But he soon learned to dull his emotions, to tolerate the intolerable, all to achieve the ultimate goal – a free Zimbabwe. But then again, what was it all for? Had he become an unthinking, uncaring, fighting machine for nothing?

The telephone's ring delivered him from the circular argument, but the

disquiet resurfaced as he heard his wife's voice rise. "What? That's not possible; he only just left here minutes ago. All right, I'll tell his father."

"What's wrong MaNgwenya? Has something happened to Bongani?"

"He's been arrested. Something about anti-government activities."

"I told him to stop this nonsense. How can he reject what we fought for? What's wrong with him? Now he's gone too far. I'm not lifting a finger. Let those who misled him worry about getting him out. Where is he?"

"They say he's at Central, Fife Street. But you can't just leave him! You know, Ndlovu, they don't feed people there, and some are even tortured. Is that what you want for your son? Are you really that cruel and uncaring? You can do what you want, but I won't abandon him. I'm going to find out what is going on, and take him food."

"You're too soft, MaNgwenya, he won't die of not having dinner; how often did we get dinner in the bush? We all learned the hard way; why can't he? How did he get messed up in this anyway?"

He listened as his wife busied herself getting ready to go out – the wardrobe door opening, then closing, water running in the bathroom, the kettle boiling on the hotplate, then steps coming back towards the sitting room where he sat slumped in his fading, threadbare armchair. He softened as he saw her enter with a tea tray.

"What do you think has gotten into him, Rachel; he's always been a good boy? It must be those friends of his, with no political roots. They don't understand that the revolution takes time, and needs to be supported, not challenged. Not everything will go smoothly all the time."

His wife knelt to put down the tray, then stood up and studied her husband's puzzled expression. "Have you never stopped to watch your son these past few months? Haven't you noticed how frustrated he is with good 'O' levels and no job? You can't manage to pay for a course for him, so he tried to raise money for fees by selling on the street, but was constantly harassed by the police. Such humiliation. How do you think a young man grows up like this? There's no escaping from responsibility by rushing off to join 'the struggle' these days."

He jumped up, quick to defend himself. "What are you saying now? Are you suggesting we were running away when we joined the war? So all this time you have been only pretending to support the war, while underneath you thought we were cowards. If I were younger this fist would make you feel my anger, but...." He dropped the hand he had raised; his posture spoke the language of defeat as he shook his head.

“No, Ndlovu, that’s not the way. This is a time for understanding, not for temper and violence. Surely it’s a time to reflect and consider what has gone wrong here. The boy is the same as you: headstrong but brave. We need to find out what he is doing and why. My guess is that you will find he has not strayed as far as you think. Now I’m going.” She turned and left, leaving him with his tea.

He wondered what she meant saying he was headstrong. Brave, yes, that he knew, but headstrong? His mind wandered back to his youth. He had less education than Bongani, having dropped out of school after Standard 6. Yet he managed to get a clerical job with an Indian trader. He had been angry and frustrated, as he dreamed of being a doctor, but that was impossible; it was the fault of the whites who monopolized everything, preventing him from going further. And so he had gravitated towards the nationalists, attending secret meetings. He thought about the times he had been arrested, handcuffed, taken to Central...

Wait a minute... Central... wasn’t that where MaNgwenya had said Bongani was now? But that was different. He was fighting the white settlers, the Boers, imperialists, capitalists. Who was Bongani fighting? Liberators. No, that could never be condoned. Selling out to the British....

He started as he heard a door close. He must have dozed off. Now he could hear them in the kitchen. “You’d better go and talk to your father and apologise for what has happened.”

“No, Mama, I can’t, he’ll never understand. I didn’t want him to find out and I’ll certainly never apologise. I’m doing what I think is right, what I have to do. We have to get rid of this government if we are to get out of this misery. If I go to prison, that’s my problem, not his.”

“You can’t say that, Bongani. We don’t want you in prison and we don’t want you in danger. These days they kill; these days you die in the prison conditions.”

“Can’t you see, that’s exactly what I’m fighting? Things are all wrong. Your generation messed everything up - no food, no jobs, no rights to anything. We have to fix it. Who is going to fix it if we don’t? We can’t even imagine having families and homes; those are for the big thieves who want to be called chefs. Do you want all of us to run away to South Africa to live on the streets there, or do you want some of us to do something?”

He stopped as he suddenly caught a glimpse of his father in the doorway.

“So we messed things up, and you are going to fix it? Who do you think you are? Ungrateful bastard! Are you really my son? MaNgwenya, how did

this intruder get into my home? You wanted to live forever under Smith and the British! We liberated you, don't ever forget that. Now speak; what have you to say for yourself!"

Bongani lowered his eyes before his father's rage, and stared at the broken floor tiles. He knew better than to try to speak in his own defence.

"I'm now ordering you to stop all this if you want to live under my roof. One more incident like this and you go. I can't have my own son denying my life's work."

He turned on his heel and retreated to his dilapidated chair. But Bongani sensed the hollowness of the words. His father was a man of action; he maintained discipline in his home not by words but by blows. And yet there had been none.

His mother's words only added to his confusion. "Don't push him, Bongani. He knows things are not right, but he can never admit it to you."

"But why does he have to keep pretending?"

"Because he's stubborn like you. His belief in himself depends on his being a fighter - following his leader, even when his leader has led him into ruin. Can't you see that he lives for his past? Don't take away his belief in the war. He can't live without it. Please, Bongani, don't break up this family. Just apologise and then do whatever you think you have to."

"So you want both of us to be living lies? Maybe the war was his dream, but it certainly isn't mine. Look at us, your children that you were supposed to be sacrificing for - half-educated, unemployed, wandering the streets. Oh no, I'm not going to apologise.

"Sorry, mama, but I can't stay here any more. I'm going."

His mother stared stunned as the door banged and her only remaining son disappeared beyond the neighbour's durawall. Would she ever see him again, or feel the energy that the young man had provided in her increasingly empty life?

Later her husband tried to console her. "Don't worry, he'll be back. He'll realize what a fool he's being."

"I'm not sure that he's the only fool in the family. Can't you see what's happening? Can't you see that he's just like you? Your father tried to stop you from joining the war, but you thought you knew better. Now you know deep down the whole thing has failed, but you are too proud to admit it. Let go of it, Ndlovu, let go, for the sake of Bongani, for the sake of the family, even for your own sake. You can't go on pretending. And you can't deny your son's right to follow his own dream. It's not too late to call him back."

Ndlovu stared at her, lifted his hands, dropped them and lifted them again to study them. What use were they now? The time for guns was past. His son would certainly take a different way. He was quiet for a while, as the wall clock ticked away the minutes, the years. Where had it all gone wrong? How had the confidence, the excitement, the belief in a better world evaporated? He was too tired to work it out. It was too complicated. All he knew was that his wife spoke the truth.

“I know,” he murmured finally, “I know. But it *is* too late. I can’t live another life. I did what I had to do and so will he. Let him go. He will learn, as we did; and just maybe he will do better.”

Ode to Departed Writers

Albert Nyathi

Dear fellow writers departed
I hope this poem finds you in good spirits
Heroes of art and self expression
Dear Dambudzo Marechera
If you suddenly came back to life again today
You would not recognise Harare
Not even Vengere Township in Rusape
Where you were born
It was very clean then
It became dirty
Very dirty in the eyes of authorities
Now it is clean again
Operation Murambatsvina came
With a large broom called bulldozer
And the new townships which were blessed
With the cutting of ribbons were all gone
Africa Unity Square had roses
And now it is clean again
And again you may not recognise it Dambudzo.

Dear Mthandazo Ndema Ngwenya
Babazala, your Bulawayo still exists,
We still have old buildings timelessly
Staring at us with question marks
No investment has come our way
They destroyed G & D shoes
And all and all and all and all
Babazala ziqunywa amakhanda ziyekwe.

We now have developed a culture of queues
Fuel queues, bread queues, sugar queues, salt queues
We have mealie-meal queues and bank queues
It's queue after queue after queue
We have lots of conmen

Conning people at every corner
We have lots of bouncing cheques
And failing businesses
Banks being bankrupt
Lots of big fish are being fried
Also small fish still face the pan
The police mean serious business
For the corrupt ones.

To fellow writers departed
To Mayford Sibanda, to Dambudzo Marechera
To Geshiom Khiyaza, and to Nandi Xaba
We remember you dearly
To the many of you
To Stan Made, to Modiki Abenia Hamutyinei
To Yvonne Vera, to Ndawana Ncube
To Peter Mahlangu, to Doris Ndlovu
And to Jane Chifamba
With all the passion, we remember you.

To Sodindo Ncube, to Stephen Alumenda
To Obadiah Mlilo, to Tisa Chifunyise
To N.P. Ndlukula, to P. J. Nondo, to Dr Chiwome
To Norbert Mutasa and to Phillios Khumalo
Since you left things have never been the same.

There is no petrol nor diesel
Neither paraffin nor kerosene
People are stressed, strained
People are squeezed, drawn out
Overstretched financially
We now budget in billions and trillions
And zillions
No longer even in millions
We now have a currency called bearer cheques.

It's all jumbled up
You have little sisters
With little skirts
Standing at every corner of the Avenues
Awaiting their turn to make a living
But the police are also cleaning up the Avenues.

Dear fellow writers departed
We now have new farmers
But God is not smiling on us
No rain comes down
So our farms are dry
O all is frustrating man
Some have left the country
And are now in the UK
Looking after old people there
Others are thieving in Botswana
And South Africa
Home is not sweet anymore for them
Home sweet home.

Dear fellow writers departed
I have to rush for a fuel queue
In a garage next door
I hear there will be
Deliveries next week
I have to start queuing now.

Jock Sherlaw

Pete Hutton

His sign board, which is egg-yellow lettering (a sort of rakish, hand-drawn italic) on a white background, has seen better days in more senses than one. It is now well worn at the edges and plentifully scratched on the surface, but still clearly and simply legible as 'Jock Sherlaw Watch and Clock Repairers Room 22 First Floor'. It has a trestle stand and every morning, I imagine, in some mysterious lightning-quick ritual that I will never observe, its proprietor puts it out in the cool, run down little arcade which also houses Bump Niteclub, Salon Pat and Poppet, Bridal Supplies ('We do everything but toss the flowers') and the Rainbow Vistarama Cinema.

[Inside the cinema, sunk in the comfortable white armchair seats, like marshmallows but full of gashes, we used to watch films on an immensely wide screen whose proportions did not seem to correspond to those of the films being projected, with the consequence that in some cases you could sit through a whole film without ever seeing the people's heads. In one French film with subtitles, the projectionist had to make the decision as to whether to move the film up in order that we could see the subtitles (but not the heads), or down to show the heads (but not the subtitles); he chose the former, so we only saw frustratingly brief glimpses of a face when a person bent down. Luckily this film was about peasant farmers, who bent down more often than people normally do, to pick turnips and cabbages in muddy fields. The cinema is now home to the Church of God Assembly.]

In the evening Jock Sherlaw's sign vanishes and can be seen lurking behind the door to the stairway which leads up to the 'rooms' - at least, I used to see it there when we went to the Vistarama. I once noticed it, in the middle of the day, folded up neatly in its night resting place and I wondered why. I can't believe its proprietor ever fails to turn up for work at Room 22, even less that he would forget to put out his yellow and white board.

Room 22 is reached through a series of corridors, where other rooms reveal assorted, small, black-run businesses. Women clatter away at knitting machines in one; in another, well-dressed men pretend to make polystyrene notices; another seems to sell second-hand religious books; there is a business whose name appears to be simply 'Pvt. (Ltd.)', followed by a description of its activities on a small sign, with unusual breaks of word:

Suppliers of Indust
Rial bearings. Ha
rdware. Electrical.

There is a Capricorn Sun Driving School, its walls lined with full size, imitation road signs complete with metal pole; one office has its door covered in polystyrene cut-outs on which messages have been created from Christmas glitter: 'Learning Workout' is the name of the business, and underneath, liberally sprinkled with exclamation marks and little smiley faces, are messages such as 'Top Tutor. Top Pupil. Top Marks.' 'Come 0%. Go 100%.'

Room 22 guides you towards it with a sign above the door saying 'Jock Sherlaw' and an arrow pointing into the doorway - as if to make sure that the customer will really walk into the correct door and not be suddenly tempted to spring across the corridor into Room 24, a tailoring business harbouring a large number of noisy women.

Entering his very small room, the first thing you notice is an unfashionable nineteen fifties wall clock inscribed 'Tempus Fugit'. Then you see Jock Sherlaw, and observe that he was once white (presumably) but now is black. Clearly, 'Jock Sherlaw Watch and Clock Repairers' is no longer Jock Sherlaw. I have discovered that, in common with half the black population of Bulawayo, his name is Mr Moyo - or Mr Pilime (I can use either, he tells me, without elaborating). Tempus Fugit indeed: the colonial days may be long over, but the name of Jock Sherlaw persists, grimly clung to by Mr Moyo. An emblem of prestige, presumably. Perhaps he even invented the name for his business and there was never a real Jock Sherlaw - except in some teenage boy's adventure book that Mr Moyo once came across.

Mr Moyo has a normal right eye and a left eye with a black lens-like attachment poking out grotesquely. This is fixed round the back of his head with a sprung metal band, and seems to be an almost permanent fixture, except that occasionally he slides it up onto his forehead - but only to make room for his normal glasses. The encumbrance-free eye is continuously screwed up, in a painful-looking manner, when he works on his watches. The unnecessary, but suitably imposing doctor's white coat which he wears while at work reveals only one glimpse of the clothing underneath: a grey and red striped tie (acrylic I suspect) from someone's school days. It does not appear to have been washed since those school days.

When a customer enters Room 22, Mr Moyo does not immediately react but remains engrossed in a watch; on occasion, indeed, the visitor can begin to wonder if he, the visitor, has turned into a ghost, as he appears to be completely invisible to Mr Moyo, and a ghostly cough is sometimes necessary to awaken Mr Moyo from his watch-induced dream. He sits on an uncomfortable-looking chair which has had its legs sawn off to half-length. In front of him is his work table, its top more or less on a level with his mouth rather than, as one would expect, his hands. Between table top and Mr Moyo's lap a sheet of grubby, once white cotton is draped, loose enough to form a pouch in which he deposits the bits of whatever he is repairing. This 'work surface' is fixed adequately to the table top, but not to his lap, with the result that if the weight of metal clock parts in the pouch becomes too heavy, the whole sheet suddenly pulls itself spitefully off his lap and spills its contents onto the floor, as happened when I visited him once.

"Shame," mumbled the other visitor, a cheerful rotund man sitting on the visitor's bench beside me. Mr Moyo stood up and tut-tutted in quiet despair as he stared at the large number of clock bits melting into the chaotic jumble of other objects littering the floor. "Shame" came from the cheerful man again, slightly more emphatic, and he tried to look less cheerful.

Let us consider Jock Sherlaw's floor, as a starting point on our tour of Room 22. Apart from a narrow meandering passage of clear space between Mr Moyo's chair and the doorway, the whole floor is occupied. A variety of old bottles - wine, spirits, cooking oil and mostly empty or nearly empty of their obviously substitute contents - stand in uneven ranks around the legs of the chair, as if vying for the opportunity to be knocked over when Mr Moyo moves his chair back. Beyond these bottles and radiating out into the dusty wildernesses of the room sit kettles, electric heaters, funnels, pine-cone weights for cuckoo clocks, cardboard boxes, bags, shoes, a piano keyboard, an electric guitar, and innumerable long-forgotten, half-repaired clocks - or rather, bits of clock, some of them of bizarre design, such as the teapot-shaped clock, the iron-shaped clock and the bell-shaped clock. There are glasses, cases, chains, hands, mechanisms, faces, knobs, and even a few exposed cuckoos lying forlornly in this graveyard of time. In some places little heaps have begun to form, so that the floor has acquired an undulating, hilly topography, and the clear passage runs like a stream through this landscape of junk.

The back wall of Jock Sherlaw's Room 22 features a range of cupboards and crudely hammered together work tops. All available space in and on

these fittings is overflowing with more clock parts, including what look like some rather attractive nineteen forties Bakelite classic clocks - but these are on the lower levels of the piles, and have presumably been inaccessible for years. On one surface is a tiny antique wooden cabinet, hardly bigger than a shoe box, with two drawers. A large desk fan stands on top of this cabinet, precariously leaning forward, and on the handles of the cabinet's drawers are hooked two coat hangers - with large coats on. It is amazing that the combined weight of leaning fan and coats does not cause the delicate little cabinet to topple forward onto the floor, but Mr Moyo seems to have ensured that his wedging and balancing of objects keeps at bay the disastrous effects of gravity (except in the case of his lap cloth). An antique chair obstructs one of the cupboards. A wooden board has been placed on the chair to create another surface on which to pile things, in this case some dust coated boxes, their contents dimly revealed as yet more tangled masses of watch and clock fragments.

And what is that contraption in the corner? It has a circular base in which sit three square squat glass jars with screw tops, one of them containing the dregs of a dirtyish milky liquid; a fat central column is topped by a control panel with a few switches and a continuously glowing red light.

The glass display cabinet which forms the main physical and psychological barrier between Mr Moyo and his customers has few shelves left inside, so this too has become a place of piles: piles of tumbling papers (including what I have observed to be several unopened letters from the tax collector) - and clock parts. Needless to say the top of the cabinet, properly the 'counter' on which customers would place their clocks or payments, is as cluttered as every other part of the room. Only one very small, token space remains free, more by chance than design.

The window sills are host to numerous piles of small, shallow, rusting metal tins. But, oddly, the walls of Room 22 are almost bare of either pictures or shelves. The effort of installing the latter has obviously been too much for the proprietor, so an opportunity to move his junk off the floor has been lost and everything slides downwards, leaving a great emptiness in the upper atmosphere of the room - refreshing to glance up to when the visual indigestion lower down becomes unbearable.

The customer who was already there when I walked in once was doing just this - looking upwards, but in a thoughtful, distracted way as he was engaged in serious discussion with the clock repairer. I made the usual unexciting greeting.

“How are you Mr Moyo?”

“Oh, I’m struggling, I’m struggling.”

The other man commented: “Well at least you’re struggling. Some of us have given up struggling. We’re down. We’re sunk. Can’t keep our heads above water any more. We’re in the deep end of the pool and we’re out of our depth. Drowned. Finished.”

I was intrigued by his metaphor, considering that most people I had come across in Bulawayo would drown in a pool anyway - even the shallow end - as few of them could swim.

Mr Moyo continued: “Ah! Eets hard. Eeeets hard,” he stressed. “And what about - eh - this Iraq? What do you think?”

There commenced a long debate in SiNdebele between Mr Moyo and his visitor. Mr Moyo was pro-America, his visitor anti. A few fragments of the discussion appeared unexpectedly in English. “United Nations inspection... ground launched missiles... suicide bombers... hearts and minds... reconstruction... this Saddam, he’s no good.”

The visitor kept glancing at me hopefully, as if to elicit an expert opinion from one of that race whose war this was, but apart from a few non-committal shakings and noddings of my head, I stayed silent. There was something too gentle and decorous, almost soporific, about this argument, to admit of my harsh, clear, certain European view. It was cosy and I did not wish to disturb it, to be the white authority.

This was the sort of discussion that I think helped Mr Moyo to repair his watches, although judging from some of his actions as he talked (such as his long search for a correct sized watch back for the watch in his lap, which, when found and lengthily ‘cleaned’ with his oily old rag, refused to fit after all) his concentration was not helped by Bush and Bin Laden.

The discussion faded out in a long series of re-assuring head shakings and agreements that became stuck in an awkward groove:

“No, it’s not nice.”

“You’re right there, it’s not nice. Not nice.”

“Not at all. No.”

“No, it’s bad. It’s really not nice.”

“Not.”

“Nice.” (The last two utterances were whisper-soft.)

Mr Moyo now sunk in his watch problems again, showed no inclination to deal with me. This, after all, was a room in which one waited, watched, talked, whiled away the hours, not a place to get one’s timepieces repaired.

When he eventually roused himself to do battle with the real world, he picked up my clock, which was on the floor at his feet inside a grease-streaked plastic bag that seemed likely to have held his sandwiches not long before. It was the only clock in the room inside a plastic bag and I wondered why - perhaps a symbolic gesture to the white man's demands for order. He held it up and turned it round thoughtfully.

"We're getting there, yes we're getting there. We've made progress. Could you come back say... Wednesday?" I could have been annoyed - I had been back four times already - but I could only smile.

The *pièce de résistance* of 'Jock Sherlaw Watch and Clock Repairers' is Mr Moyo's main table, the one in front of his chair, to which his work cloth is attached. Over this table hangs, on long bending metal rods fixed to a wall shelf (the only one in the room - and apparently only serving this purpose), a fluorescent light. One of its two tubes is missing of course (as with the ceiling light - but a group of presumably non-working fluorescent tubes lean against one corner of the room). This light hangs much lower at one end, as the metal rods have bent unevenly. Despite this severe departure from the horizontal, the top surface of the light supports a crowded collection of items, mainly small jars, indeterminate tools and the inevitable watch parts.

The table itself is a study in chaos. Hundreds - perhaps thousands - of watch faces and watch backs and watch hands and watch straps and watch mechanisms, with a few clocks protruding here and there, lie jumbled together in a compost heap of benign neglect. They have, one feels, found their final resting place here. They will never tick cheerfully again. One or two of them may be plucked out from time to time by Mr Moyo, as donated organs for otherwise healthy watches. But, in the main, these are the excreta of the operations of Jock Sherlaw, and serve no further purpose other than to constipate all free movement on Mr Moyo's only real work table. A small cockroach wanders forlornly through this foodless landscape (unless it has developed a taste for leather straps).

To Mr Moyo, one feels, this almost nightmarish accumulation of dead mechanisms is a reassurance and a paying homage: these are wonders of Western technology, miniaturised perfections of gleaming silver and brass and gold, tiny once-ticking souls, imbued with the mystery of how they could possibly be created. They must be honoured and loved, even in their uselessness. They deserve better than the rubbish bin (where they belong): they deserve an eternal afterlife in the paradise of Room 22.

Reduced, for his work surface, to a smelly old cloth that regularly vomits

its contents onto the ground, Mr Moyo is mocked by this glittering display of redundancy, clutter, junk. On my last visit only two extremely small concessions of space to useful objects had been made: on the right corner of the table was a glass tumbler full to the brim with a blood-red liquid, Mr Moyo's raspberry syrup drink; and a small, neat, pink, 1930s moulded plastic alarm clock, finally repaired. Mine.

“How much do I owe you Mr Moyo?”

Uncle Benny

Mathew Chokuwenga

Darkness slowly began to crowd the room where I sat wondering when Uncle Benny was going to come. Fullness and emptiness almost equally shared the space that the room possessed.

Right in the corner, beside the window, a silver paraffin stove, that was black with dirt, sat on top of the wooden stand Uncle Benny had given me. White porridge wax from the sadza I had cooked two days ago had stuck and hardened all over the stove.

In the second corner, my few clothes, most of them rags, formed an anthill. Beside that anthill was a small green plastic bucket, which I used mostly for washing my dirty clothes. I sat in the third corner, on a large plastic mat that was my uncomfortable sleeping place. Just where the mat ended, my books lay empty of any order. Among them was a thick black book that had been given to me by my grandmother just before she died.

“Takunda, my grandchild, now I am really going. You know my bible?”

“Yes grandmother.”

“I want you to have it. I bought it just after your grandfather married me. It’s a special book and it will always be a special book, though I have failed to follow some of its laws. I want you to have it and read it.”

“But grandmother...,” I interrupted.

“Let me finish. Read it and treasure its words in your mind and heart and they will guide you in this life.”

My four walls were completely empty of anything that added any beauty to their ugliness. Time slowly fell into night. I sat there still, held hostage by my mind as it rained questions at me like a hailstorm. My light bulb had ceased to function months ago. Since then I had lived in the dark, though, whenever I could afford a candle, it would, for a few moments, chase the darkness from my room with its little blue, white and orange flame. I loved the sight of the smoke that danced like a silk veil in the wind. I watched the flame eat away the waxed stick, as the thread at its centre faithfully carried the flame all the way down to the last melt of wax. The candlelight might kill the darkness but it failed to kill the shadows, especially my shadow that vowed it would die only when I died.

Sometimes I would sit there and watch my shadow dangle on the walls in time with the movement of the flame. Was it alive? Sometimes it appeared

as a giant, sometimes long and thin. With all the different forms it took, it still remained my dark image. Unlike my mirror image, it was black, ugly and flat, and did not show all my features. Empty of beauty, a laugh or a cry, with only one colour. It thrilled me to think that everyone, whatever their colour, had the same black shadow.

The shadow grew from me, running away from the sun or any light. Once I thought, what if I was to be the shadow and the shadow me? The thing I would have loved most about being the shadow was to have someone living my life for me, being free of worry, pain, hunger, anger and all the other things I suffer from as a human being.

Time passed and Uncle Benny did not bang on the blue door. Uncle Benny was tall and thin. A man who I likened to a mosquito because of his thinness and blackness. He was a man who loved to keep his face free of any beard or moustache. I think he often wished that he had remained a baby with a smooth soft face. I would often catch him running his hand all over his smooth flat cheeks, long jaw and pointed chin. The cheeks that made him look like he had gills. Uncle Benny, who was not a relative of mine, was a man I had grown to dislike. You might wonder at my addressing him as uncle.

Since my grandmother died a lot of changes had taken place. My relatives had come, carried away all grandmother's property and left me as if I was the rusty body of an old motor car whose engine had long been removed. They had left me with fat words that were fat with emptiness. Three of the rooms of our four-roomed house were now occupied by lodgers, one of these being Uncle Benny. Auntie Skha had found him where she had found him and the rest, about the type of their relationship and how deep it went, I did not know and I did not want to know. By Auntie Skha's authority, Uncle Benny, a total stranger, had been solely entrusted with my life. At first I did not mind, believing Auntie Skha to know what she was doing. But Uncle Benny began to be meaner and meaner to me. He ended up treating me like an outcast, beating me and scolding me daily.

I told Auntie Skha about the way he treated me and she shouted back at me, "I am fed up with you complaining about him. Can't you appreciate that at least he takes care of you. You should be grateful. You are just a problem. I don't know how your grandmother managed with you."

When I told her about my not going to school because my school fees had not been paid, she retorted, "Why waste money on someone like you? You are naughty, you don't listen and, worse still, you are just a failure at

school. I am not going to take care of someone else's problem." I realised then that my grandmother had been the only person who loved and cared for me.

It was late at night and the streets were very quiet. Most people were asleep and snoring in the houses that stood like brothers and sisters to our house. I also slept quietly, visiting places in my dreams I had never been.

From a distance a bang came searching for me until it finally got hold of me deep in my dream and pulled me all the way back to consciousness. That bang, followed by another and then countless others, meant that Uncle Benny was at the door. The noise was so loud that it sounded as if he was going to beat the door to pieces.

"Hey Takunda, wake up," he shouted, with a voice whose speed had been retarded by alcohol. "Come on, open up."

I felt anger growing inside me as I blindly took my sleepy self to the door that went into his room. I searched for the switch. I found it and light filled his room.

"Takunda, open up, you orphan."

Anger rushed through me like a tornado, but I still kept quiet as I turned the key. Before I could move out of the way, the door opened right in my face, pushing me, fortunately, on to his old bed whose comfort had long died. The blankets stunk of cigarettes and dirt.

He struggled his way into the cold room, whose air smelt of paraffin and now alcohol that diffused from him and the brown bottle he carried. He stood in the open door motionless, looking like a painting with a black background whose frame was the doorframe.

"Who do you think you are?" trying hard to balance on his wobbly legs. "I said, who do you think you are?"

Silence took the next short moment. He gave his voice freedom once more.

"Do I look like your friend, your mother or father?"

His eyes meandered in their pits and his head slowly came down, then slowly up again, as if his neck muscles were no longer fully functional.

"Come here, I said, come here." I raised my small frame from his stinking bed and slowly walked it to him. I stood before him shivering, not from fear of this man who was thinner than a reed, but from anger and frustration. His hands dropped to his sides; in his left hand he held the beer bottle by its neck and it seemed that he would lose his grip at any moment. I was not sure what he wanted to do with me, but I was prepared for anything.

I was fed up with his treatment; I had tolerated this stranger for too long.

“Have you ever been beaten?” He pointed the finger of his empty hand straight into my face that held on to stillness. “I am not scared of you, young man. You think fourteen is being a man. Besides, it’s my generosity that takes care of you. I’m not your father or mother, okay?”

“What did I do?”

“Don’t grumble at me, or I’ll hit you right now.”

I looked furiously at him; that’s when he hit me with a fist that should have been meant for a man like him, not a boy like me. I fell face down. The next thing I saw when I opened my eyes was a black pot, which stood like a giant in front of me. I staggered to my feet, grabbing hold of the handle of the pot. I turned, spotted his slim figure and swung the pot fiercely in his direction. It hit him on the side of his head, almost on his ear. He howled like a dog and joy filled me. He crashed against the wall before falling to the ground carelessly, the way a heavy piece of cloth would fall after being released from a person’s hand. My joy turned to misery. He lay still on the floor, like a heap of useless junk. His brown bottle lay somewhere in between us, unbroken, and in gulps it slowly fed the floor with its contents, the smell slowly crowding the room.

My mind told me that I had killed him and, there and then, I lost all appetite to live. Fear told me I was already a prisoner serving a life sentence, or waiting for the day of execution. Thinking how I hated and feared the police and anything to do with them, I could not help crying as I left the house in confusion. I ran for a couple of minutes before the houses came to an end. What stood in front of me was a small forest that was completely black with darkness.

I entered the forest, falling repeatedly as my feet were surprised by a sharp rise or depression. The first time I stopped, I looked back and saw the small, almost black houses that had shrunk with distance. The tower lights that stood spaced like giant guards among them seemed to stare at me saying ‘you can never get away’ with their large burning eyes. The whole night saw me crouched in a tree in the forest, sweating, as my mind insisted on reciting what I had done and, worse still, the prison in which I would spend my life.

Like always, dawn broke the next morning and I watched the sun rise as it resurrected with my fears and tears. Even if I were to run, where would I go? Who would I stay with? I could never get away from the police for they were like fortune-tellers, if not dogs that would sniff me from any refuge. After a long debate between my head and my heart, that took almost all

morning, I thought of my grandmother and decided to go back home and face whatever was waiting for me.

I slowly approached the house, but did not see the police car that my fear had vowed would be there. I turned into the gate and saw a figure sitting on the lawn, its back to me. The figure turned its head my way as my bare feet made a sound on the path. The figure had a bandage wrapped around the upper part of its head. The figure wore khaki shorts with a vest and smoked a cigarette. The figure was Uncle Benny. I walked towards him and sat quietly beside him.

A Secret Place

Jason Emde

It was Saturday night when Franky died and the moon was everywhere. I was watching tv with Mary in the living room when the doorbell rang. I thought *My friends are here* and I got up and walked into the foyer and opened the door already starting to grin that sly grin that comes over you when the sun drops in the west and it's Saturday night and everything is full of massive and mysterious promise and you know everything will happen to you, when you know everything can't help but perfect itself. So there I was grinning as I pulled the door open. Mary was giggling in the living room. On the front step stood an old man wearing glasses and holding his hat over his belly with both hands. Behind the glasses his eyes were blue and huge. Hello, I said. He blinked his huge eyes. Can I help you? I asked. He was turning the hat around and blinking on the front step. The moon poured down over everything in the front yard behind him. A car drove down Sable Road with its lights on. No wind. Sir? I asked, with my eyebrows raised and a strange feeling in my mouth from using the word. Since when have I ever called anybody sir? He wet his lips with his tongue. Do you have a dog? he finally blurted out. Still turning the hat around in his hands. He blinked and blinked. I should have caught on then but I didn't. Yes, I said, we have two dogs, a white one and a sort of tan one. In fact I shouldn't have said *we*. The Michaelsons were my third host family in Zimbabwe when I was there on exchange. The idea was that I was supposed to live with them like one of the family. It wasn't working out, really.

You better come with me then, the man said. I think you better, ah, come over here. With me. Blink.

I told him to wait a minute and went to get Matthew. He was in the study, bent over his desk. After I knocked I said, Matthew, some guy is outside and he thinks he might have hit Franky or Joey in the road. Matthew looked up from his desk. His facial expression is always the same. You think he's about to burst out laughing but I've never seen him do it. He's a very serious guy, Matthew is. Too serious, if you ask me. But what do I know?

We walked out through the front door and down the walkway to the road. The old man was standing by the gate, still turning his hat around and around. He watched us coming toward him and then abruptly turned and strode out into the road towards what I assumed was his car. I watched the

shadows from the trees above the path move over Matthew's back and shoulders as he walked with his purposeful and self-important stride.

The moon was huge and covered everything. A Saturday night moon, I thought. Perfect moon for Saturday night. The moon covered Franky where he lay on the road just outside the headlights of the car.

Is that your, ah, dog? asked the man. He looked about to say something else but he didn't. The moon shone off his glasses. Round and round went the hat. I lit a cigarette and threw the match in the road.

Matthew knelt over the dog. Yes, that's Franky, he said. One half of Matthew was in the glare of the headlights and the other half was in the moon glare. Yes, it is, he said. The old man said, He ran out in front of me. I barely saw him. I didn't have time to stop. It took only a second to happen. I'm sorry, he said.

Well, Matthew said as he stood up, these things happen. Don't blame yourself. Your dog's dead, Matthew, I thought. Your kids' dog is dead, I thought. I didn't know what to think. I don't especially care for dogs myself.

I'm sorry, I really am, said the man. He just ran out in front of me. I didn't have time to stop. He blinked furiously. Matthew had that look on his face. I stood there and smoked. I remembered the time I'd gone out to check the mailbox and Franky had jumped up on me and dirtied my new shirt and I'd walked back into the house and said to Mary, Damn that dog, he filthied me up. Mary had nodded, serious, considering. I threw my cigarette away.

Well, Matthew said, what's done is done. Thank you for letting us know. The man nodded and blinked and put his hat on his head and got in his car and drove away. Matthew picked Franky up off the road. Now there was only the moon and Matthew and me and the dog. The body of the dog. Poor dead Franky. We walked back in through the gate. Matthew put Franky down underneath a tree in the front yard and I saw the moon in Franky's eyes. I wondered if Matthew would close them like they do to dead people in movies and such. He didn't. We went inside.

Matthew stepped into the living room. Mary, can you come into the dining room please, he said. Jack, will you sit with them while I go get Katherine and the other two? he asked. Katherine was his wife. I thought then that she was very pretty. I still do, I guess. Blond and quiet and graceful and pretty. Too pretty to be with Matthew, I thought. I wonder if he still has that haw-haw look on his face when he's in bed with her. Probably. He'd probably look the same if it were Katherine dead in the road. Mary and I walked across the passage and into the dining room and sat down. Mary sat

down next to me. I liked Mary. She was seven. I wondered what she would do when Matthew told her that Franky was dead. She tapped her fingers on the table and looked around.

Matthew came into the dining room with Thomas behind him. Thomas was ten years old, the oldest of the Michaelson children, and the most awkward and annoying. I didn't know if he was awkward and annoying because he was the oldest or because he was ten or maybe because of some other reason. He sat down on my other side. Katherine came in carrying Jacob, the youngest. He had an ugly red scratch on his forehead. It seemed to me he always had a scratch on his forehead, or on his cheek, or a bruise on his thigh or his hand swollen from an antbite or something. Katherine sat down with him next to Matthew. I thought to myself, Everybody ready? Here we go.

Franky has been hit by a car, Matthew said. He still looked like he was about to laugh, really crack up. I'm sorry to say that he's been killed, he said.

There, I thought, ok, that's all, now let my friends come and pick me up, let this Saturday night go smoothly and beautifully. Mary tapped her fingers on the table.

Katherine told her, gently enough, to stop. She did stop but a minute later she started tapping again. Tappity-tap. Then she shut her eyes and kept them shut, tight.

Where's Franky? asked Jacob.

Franky is in heaven, Jake, Thomas said. The Michaelsons were Roman Catholics. I'd gone to church with them one Sunday to show I was a good sport but decided never to go again after Matthew told me I couldn't wear sandals and that I had to tuck my shirt in.

Does your God really care if my shirt is tucked in or not? I had asked, not very intelligently - I was only 18 - and Matthew had said, of course, that it made no difference if God cared or not but that he, Matthew, did. Typical. Anyway I never went again.

Franky is in heaven because that's where you go when you die, right mom? asked Thomas. Right? Katherine nodded. She was stroking Jacob's hair. Tappity-tap.

Where's Franky? asked Jacob. His eyes went from face to face around the table. I remembered the time I'd come home from school and walked into my room and found him in there shredding my cigarettes into the ashtray. Jacob! I'd yelled. He'd shrieked and giggled and run out of the room. Katherine stroked his hair and his eyes went from face to face.

Where's Franky?

Franky is dead now, Jacob, Matthew said. His voice was calm and level. His face looked like he'd just read an amusing article in the newspaper or something. Franky is gone now, he said.

Franky will be happy in heaven, won't he mom? said Thomas.

The day before I'd taken all three of them out to a nearby park on a silver dragon hunt. Silver dragons are rare and dangerous, I said, but I read in the newspaper they've been spotted in this park. So watch yourselves.

Mary had reached for my hand as we walked. Dragons are *real*, she said. Right, Jack? The sun had been out, the park was green and fresh. Jacob romped and stomped around, happy to be included in the adventure. Thomas had been prepared to defend us all. He'd been prepared to be brave. I'm not even afraid of dragons, he said, sticking his jaw out. He was trying to be brave now, at this table in this room. I wondered what he thought heaven would be like. To tell you the truth, I had no idea whatsoever what he thought it'd be like.

Franky will be very happy in heaven, Katherine said.

Won't Joey be lonely now? asked Mary, her eyes still closed. And that's when it happened. I felt a rush of pity, a rush of pity and huge sadness. For all of us there, at the dining room table on a Saturday night, and for the poor blinking old man, and for poor dead Franky, and for everyone. I felt sad and tired and lost. The suddenness and obviousness of it surprised and disgusted me. The little room, that little dining room in the house on Sable Road and the quiet talk of death in it. I wanted very much to be by myself. I got up from the table and I pushed my chair in and I walked out of the room and down the hallway. They were still talking about heaven in the dining room and I couldn't hear their voices anymore. I sat on my bed. The moon came in through the window. I got up and I turned on the light and went over to the desk. I picked up a pen and opened my notebook. I wrote this down: *Mary with her eyes closed tight beside me - Jacob wants to know where his dog is - I'd like to unburden myself of pain.* That last was a quote from somewhere. A song, maybe? A poem?

I closed the notebook and went into the hallway and opened the door to the verandah. I sat down on the step and lit a cigarette. The light from the moon soaked into the yard, into the trees, into the grass, into the flowerbeds. There was a light wind now and the flowers moved in the wind. I could see the picnic table by the pool where I'd sat with Josephine the night before. We'd talked about love, about what we knew about love, which wasn't very

much. Josephine was eighteen, too. We'd talked about the great tenderness and the great hope. We'd talked about travelling and books. We'd talked about the night we walked around downtown Bulawayo for hours and argued about my old girlfriends in Canada. I sat there on the step smoking and thinking about Josephine. After a while I stopped thinking about her and I didn't think about anything. I could hear one bird in a secret place.

Thomas came outside and sat down beside me on the step. I moved the hand holding the cigarette so the smoke wouldn't go in his face.

Look, I said. Do you know what kind of flowers those are, Thom? I pointed.

I don't know, he said.

Yeah, me either, I said.

Lilacs? he said.

We sat there on the step. I finished my cigarette and put it out. Matthew didn't like it when I left my butts lying around but I knew the gardener liked to roll the tobacco in them into his massive drooping newspaper cigarettes, so I hid it behind a flower pot. I gave the gardener supplementary cigarettes every time I saw him but he seemed to prefer his homerolls. I didn't see him very often anyway. Once he killed a cobra in the flowerbeds.

I lit another cigarette. Another Madison. On my first night at the Michaelsons' the children would all fall on the floor and pretend to cough and gag whenever I lit up. They were good kids. Sometimes they were pretty funny.

Thomas said, I looked up in the sky. And I saw a star. And I said to myself, that's Franky's star.

I turned to look at him. He laughed, embarrassed. It was a pretty corny thing to say. Thomas has short red hair. I suddenly liked him very much.

Yeah, I said, I did too.

Thomas and I sat there on the step. I listened to the bird and I watched the flowers moving. Mary came out of the house. Thomas and I made room for her on the step. She sat down between us.

Jack, she said. Do you want to come have a pillow fight? With me and Jacob?

Nah, I said. I'm going out tonight. I got up. Goodnight, Mary. Goodnight, Thom.

Goodnight Jack, said Thomas. He was watching the flowers now.

Can we have a pillow fight tomorrow? said Mary.

Sure, I said. I wanted to kiss her goodnight. I wanted to kiss Thomas

goodnight too but Matthew had always discouraged me from being what he called 'too affectionate' with his kids. Sure, I said. You and me against the boys, Mary. Ok?

Ok, she said.

I went inside. I could hear Thomas asking Mary if she knew what kind of flowers those were. I knocked on the door of Matthew's study. Yes? he asked. I told him I was going out. What time will you be back? he asked. I said I didn't know exactly, but not too late, and then I closed the door and went through the entranceway and out the front door and down the walk. Franky was gone. Where he had been was only shadows and moon now. I wondered where Matthew had put him. I sat on the fence by the road and waited for my friends. For some reason all I could think about was a letter I'd received from my friend Bill where he said that the first time he went skydiving he'd looked out of the plane and said, Big world. I sat on the fence covered in the light from the moon and smoked and thought, over and over, Big world. Big world. Sure.

My friends drove up in a car. I got off the fence and opened the back door and got inside. Josephine said, Hi Jack. Neil was driving and he turned around in his seat and said, Hey man! How you! I told him what I'd written in my notebook. I said, I'd like to unburden myself of pain. Neil laughed and drove down Sable Road. Oh shit! he said. Jack's depressed! Better get some fucking beer in his belly and all! The moon was all over the road and all over everything. For the rest of the night I couldn't think about anything. If somebody asked me what I was thinking about, I said: I'd like to unburden myself of pain. I must have said that to Josephine five or six times. Sometimes I changed it. Sometimes I said, Big world. Pretty soon it wasn't Saturday night anymore. That was ok with me.

id i

(id - the Freudian dark inaccessible part of the mind)

Christopher Mlalazi

A thick cloud of dust creeps over the houses. From under the barber's thorn tree, one can see the green finger of a pine pointing accusingly at the afternoon sky above the corrugated asbestos roofs.

The township resounds to the new language of the beleaguered government, sunk to gutter tricks - vindictive four-pound hammers on backyard shacks.

The barber, Qaphela, is Hitlering his moustache with a generator powered electric shaver, looking into a cracked mirror, one eye on a group of young girls walking past the tree with water pails balanced on their heads, which are splashing water on their dress fronts, making them cling to their breasts.

"The next to go are condoms," Qaphela is saying above the bzeee of the shaver. "And how then are we going to screw all these nice girls – *eiish!* - just look at those tits Fa!" He makes a sucking sound with his lips at the girls, who completely ignore him. The township hasn't had tap water for almost five months now with all the supply dams empty because of drought. Supplies, though erratic, are delivered by bowser by the desperate opposition party city council.

"That is impossible." I reply. "What about the disease?" A pungent smell pervades the township from unflushed toilets.

"Nx!" his tongue clicks in disgust, and he points with the mirror. "What is this?"

A convoy of pushcarts appear from the dust mist, laden with cheap household property, with families and their pets behind each pushcart in an orderly cavalcade – only lacking outriders, so I think. My mind flashes to my walk last night.

There is something magical about walking under orange streetlights at night, facing the oncoming traffic, cars zipping past, their headlights shining brightly, leaving one half blinded, and realising that, after all, one can freely walk in the opposite direction, that a strong will can shatter any shackles, shrugging off all the excess baggage of the past. Like injustice armed.

In mid stride, and frowning, I had turned around, and caught the tail also casually turning around. He walked away from me, retracing the direction that had brought me here from home after supper.

I looked over my shoulder - the other one had also turned around, and was now following me, silhouetted against the car headlights behind him. He was speaking into a radio.

I quickened my pace, dry sand in my mouth. The man in front quickened his too, for the distance between us did not close. And neither did that of the other behind me.

A shiny black Benz suddenly slid to a stop beside me on the road, a convoy of identical cars winding behind it as far as the eye could see. Outriders, all in camouflage and with AK's strapped across their backs, lounged on motorbikes on either side of each car, faces concealed by visored helmets that bounced off the orange of the street lights.

The back passenger window electrically slid down, the interior light flicked on, and my heart skipped as he looked out at me. An old woman sat beside him, mouth and cheeks sunken, as if she was sucking something in the far away mountains of time, something dimly remembered, that would, had it decided to yield, have blown out her cheeks with the cherubic bloom of youth.

"You are now famous," he said to me, slowly, softly. "Just like your brother, but for the wrong reasons."

I killed my brother and buried him in a shallow unmarked grave. He was insane.

I get home, and the yard in front is thick with onlookers. They are all silently looking in the direction of the matchbox size house. A tense aura hovers over them, so thick that it is almost a wall, as if any moment it would snap into unimaginable maggoty terror, and they would all flee away screaming. I feel my crotch hairs coil. What could it be this time?

I bulldoze through them, and on the other side run into the arms of a stupidly pot bellied policeman.

"Get back" he growls menacingly, raising a baton stick, so that it neatly slices the crimson setting sun behind him right in the middle.

"He lives here!" the crowd cries out. A radio in the distance drums the prelude to the now sickening daily shovel full of six pm propaganda, buttered on both sides, to the discerning ear, with insincerity.

The policeman takes my hand and pulls me from the crowd, which is

pressing hard on my back. I see mother. She is sitting on the ground in front of the house, a broken figure, shoulders hunched, her hands covering her downcast face. Two other elderly women, sad faced, and murmuring softly, are kneeling on either side of her, their hands on her shoulders.

"It is bad," the policeman says in a surprisingly soft voice beside me. My eyes on mother, my heart a lump of meat in my throat, I had forgotten all about him.

Between their seats was a silver tray, and on it a half full bottle of whisky, a wooden ice bucket with a large silver spoon inside, and two glasses, one empty, the other half full.

"Sort of," I had shrugged my shoulders. "It's only the free international media that has accorded me that modest status."

The old woman was dressed in an animal skin skirt, a party cloth around her flat chest, and a necklace of red, black and white beads around her wrinkled neck.

"At my expense."

I licked my dry lips. "My voice is universal. I just write, and should that irk the reader, that means the path of virtue has been side stepped."

His nose twitched. "You are insane." He looked at the old woman. "A drink please." His eyes returned back to me. "You have waged an acidic and very idiotic war against us." The words were spat.

A flight of silver fish flashed past overhead against the dark sea of the sky, and I winced at the sound of the jet engines.

"If that is so," I replied. "I wasn't aware of it. I have never pointed a finger at anyone in my life."

"That is my mother," I find myself saying, pointing at her. The scent of frying onion suddenly fills the air. A car hoots sharply somewhere.

Then they come out of the house. First, my brother, in hand and foot cuffs, held on either side by two burly policemen. He is laughing, his eyes opened wide, and rolling. His trousers and t-shirt are splattered with blood, which is more concentrated around his crotch.

Then the first coffin, made of metal. A hush descends over the onlookers, touchable, as if the very air has held its breath.

"Your father," the policeman says, just as mother suddenly leaps to her feet and races to the coffin, screaming and tearing at her hair. I feel my heart rip in the middle. "Your brother cut his head open with an axe."

The axe that he used to say was an AK 47, and sometimes would rat-tat-tat it outside the house at passers by, his face set in grim lines, his eyes afire. The car hoots again, this time insistently, and irritatingly. I feel like shouting out for it to shut up.

Then another coffin, this one of wood. The crowd sighs, like a deflating sky.

"Who is that?" I whisper in dread. The sun has turned a yellow red over the horizon of the asbestos roofs. The watching crowd now look like gold statues from this heavenly light. Shocked gold statues. Mouths half open.

"The daughter in law," comes the soft reply.

"Insanity runs in your family Fa!" Sofi's voice echoes in my head, accusing, as if she had said the words just this very day.

"You are mistaken," I had argued hotly. "My brother's problem is not hereditary, it's the army and what they did out there that did that to his head."

The old woman half filled the empty glass on the tray from the bottle, added some ice, and handed it to him, her hand trembling, her cheeks sucking.

"Your mouth shall be your grave one day," his eyes were fixed on mine. "And a deep one too, because I notice that it is very big, even bigger than the cunt of Mount Vesuvius." He drank from his glass. The old woman took the other glass and sipped from it.

A TV was in front of his plush white leather seat, and it was showing, over and over again, a scratchy black and white clip of a jubilant young Mobuto Sese Seko sitting, nasty Chinese Godfather like, on a shaded platform carried on the shoulders of sweating militia along the afternoon streets of Mubji-Mayi, whilst ragged povo lining it danced and ululated. Beside Mobuto was also carried, same style, Queen Fabiola of Belgium, then King Baudoin, all in sunglasses, teeth flashing in radiant smiles.

My brother had been a member of the notorious crack regiment that had been sent south to break the spine of the dissident menace.

And when he came back years later, carrying a ceremonial knobkerrie, its head a tiny grinning human skull with a single coil of human hair pasted on its head, he was no longer the beloved brother that I knew. The brother, as infants, that I had played hide and seek with on hot summer nights under the innocent stars. The loving brother who had protected me from bullies at junior school. The dear brother who had had a nice girlfriend who loved me,

in a sisterly way, and I also her.

Upon his arrival from distant lands, life at home capsized like a tiny boat caught in a violent cyclone. Mother divided the sitting room with a curtain, and brother used one side as his bedroom, while I and my young wife, Sofi, used the other side. Father and mother used the other room, and we cooked outside in a shaky lean to.

"I am going back home Fa," Sofi told me one day in the cramped outside toilet as we bathed.

"Third World illiterate society," the old woman said, leaning over him, and peering myopically at me, "which is the majority on the continent, is afflicted by an incurable disease that makes them fanatically believe that being a member of the ruling party is inherent," she pointed her glass at me – in the other hand she held a familiar ceremonial knobkerrie, its head a grinning skull, but this one in a red beret. "That, even if it does not deliver, it is a punishable crime to voice one's discontent, and tyranny has a field day – as you once wrote," she cackled softly, "dear writer."

"Why?" I had asked her, busy soaping my crotch.

"Your brother," she was waiting for the soap. She has a dark birthmark on her belly, just above the navel, that is shaped almost like the map of the country.

"I understand Sofi, but since I am not working..." I left the sentence hanging.

"You can come and see me at home and, when you find a job, we can find a back yard shack of our own, and we will be together again."

She was right of course. My brother. Sometimes he muttered barely comprehensible things across the curtain at night as we lay, of killing father and throwing his body into a disused mine shaft. If that was not chilly enough, he ranted of raping the neighbour's wife, and if the husband said anything, of forcing him to drip burning plastic on her until she went to the devil, whilst his friends held a bazooka to his child's head.

Mother had taken him to several nyangas around the township, even out in the rural areas, but none seemed to be able to exorcise the bad spirits that tormented him so much. Instead, with every excursion, he seemed to deteriorate further.

"You didn't think I knew you, newspaper lover?" he asked. "In fact, let me

advise you. That vain love of yours to see your long face in the media will one day translate into something that will make you wish you had never come out of your mother's hole," he spat at my feet, forcefully.

"Let's take him to a psychiatrist." I had argued with my father one day when he had shat in the house.

"It's a traditional problem," father had replied. We were standing outside the house as mother cleaned the mess inside with water. Sofi had walked to the neighbour's to escape the stink, something that I constantly warned her about, for our problems were our own, not food for the whole township. "A traditional healer has instructed me to take him back to where he was stationed during the dissident era. He must apologise to the spirits of that land, and the country shall be healed." Of course when my brother had still been out there, news from the international press had filtered into the country, of gruesome atrocities committed by the soldiers on innocent villagers verging on genocide, but we did not believe it, for the local press dismissed it as false. After all they were government soldiers.

"He was raping her, and when your father came into the house, he did that to him," the policeman says softly, the edge of his hand chopping at the side of his head. "He throttled her dead with his hands first, then dripped burning plastic on her body, before raping her."

Twilight has crept in, and to the west, a brilliant tint of gold and red stains the horizon where the sun has set, the final flare up before darkness blankets the township.

The car is now hooting continuously. The person being sought must be in the crowd around the house. The scent of frying onion is now acrid. The cook must also be here.

The parcel I had brought for father from the nyanga, for the journey of appeasement to the south tomorrow morning, drops to the ground from my paralysed hands.

I killed him over and over, in my mind, and buried him in a shallow unmarked grave. He killed my beloved wife and father.

His eyes glowed with rich laughter, and he continued, pointing a finger at me. "But for now, count yourself lucky, I have found another use for you."

The old woman grinned sweetly at me.

Me useful to him?

He brought a radio to his mouth. "Commence phase two."

“Roger,” the radio squawked back, and the cavalcade raced up the road. My mind flashes back to the present, and my eyes focus on the pushcart cavalcade. The operators seem to be pushing the carts around in aimless circles, like victims of a bomb blast.

“But the condoms won’t go,” I reply stubbornly. An old man shoots out of the dust, a policewoman, a girl almost, wielding an upraised four-pound hammer, hot on his heels. They vanish into the dust again. I was to learn later at the beer garden from Million, the local drunk, that the old man had insulted the police when they had smashed down his backyard goblin run, and all the goblins skedaddled down an ant hole.

“They are foreign funded, and it is now claimed they have political connotations – the new bill,” says Qaphela.

“So I must hoard plenty in my room, just in case.”

“The police are going to conduct door to door searches, and, if you are found with them...” he points the droning shaver at my face, and leaves the sentence hanging, then his voice drops into a conspiratorial whisper. “I am going to propose to ugly girls now. They are the new food. Nobody wants them, so they don’t have the disease, and whatever they lack on their faces they have got it all here.” He points at his crotch with the shaver, his eyes glinting mischievously. He has a neat box cut, black school trunk like.

“You are not the only one on that line,” I say, thinking of Gertrude. Please forgive me Sofi in your final resting place. One day we shall be together again. Love you eternally.

A group of people, all wearing opposition party t-shirts, and singing anti ruling party songs embellished with deliciously obscene words, emerge from the dust mist at a half trot. A police truck suddenly brakes to a stop in front of them, helmeted riot police leap from its back and cleave into them, hitting with baton sticks, kicking, stomping, hacking with perspex shields. In a split second, they are all handcuffed and bundled into the back of the truck, and it races into the dust.

I had given it to her, protected of course, in the faeces stinking forest behind the township last night in a sitting position, a rock painfully digging into my buttocks, and her standing over me, doing all the moving – a piston couldn’t have matched her. Maybe she was looking for marriage. After it, and a shit because of the unflushing toilets, we went back to the township not speaking to each other, and I parted with her at the first opportune moment. Poor girl, I never want to see her again. She is so ugly, with a face like those fifties Albion lorries one finds in scrap yards – all cheeks and no

forehead.

A military helicopter, in brand new jungle colours, clatters into view over the houses, flying dangerously low, skimming over the roofs. It heads straight for us.

Open-mouthed, we watch it as it gets bigger and bigger. Suddenly, it banks to the left, and, for a moment, its perspex bubble is fully exposed. A prickle runs down my spine. The interior is filled with money changers, all dressed in white gowns, and carrying shepherds' crooks. They are all on their knees in neat rows, their heads on the helicopter floor in supplication. In front of them stands the priest, this one in a blue gown with a huge dollar sign at the chest, and he is carrying a bible, his lips moving in prayer. I gasp in shock. It is him again. The helicopter clatters past, still low. Its side is emblazoned with the words '*Zhing Zhong*' in Uhuru colours. It disappears over the roofs.

"State collaboration," Qaphela says, pointing with a pair of scissors after the helicopter. "After all, the black-market is now controlling our economy. Problem with them is they don't want to go to school, I keep telling the money changers that, otherwise the Minister of Finance would be from their ranks. I wonder how one can become one of them and leave breathing in other people's hair under a tree all day."

"You should use one of those things – the ones that cover your nose – when you are shaving."

"And have people laughing at me," he laughs. I laugh too.

The helicopter clatters back, and hovers over us. I look up. The money changers line the perspex bubble, all looking down at me, something ominous about their stares. He is standing in their midst, now wearing ancient dark aviator goggles. The old woman, in similar goggles, stands beside him, a shiny silver machete in one hand, in the other a golden bowl. She is stark naked, her wizened body, uncannily, resembling the letter 'i', straight to the dot.

"They want you," Qaphela whispers softly. He is also looking up. The spinning rotor of the helicopter is a solid silver disc against the flaming lapis lazuli fire of the sky.

I leap to my feet and bolt away.

The helicopter follows slowly behind me. Panic stricken, I shoot into a beer garden, thinking that there I will find sanctuary in the mad crowd of boozers. But the boozers are all sitting still on their benches, mugs of undrunk beer in their hands. They are all looking up at the helicopter. They turn

towards me. Their mouths are all sealed with brown adhesive plaster.

I flee from the beer garden, down a road with a cliff falling away on the right to the main road, where cars are zipping along in explosive speed, their shapes blurred. Uniformed policemen line the road on one side, all looking up at the helicopter, religious awe pulsing over them like an electric field, their right hands touching their caps in salute. As I pass them, one of them grabs me, and pulls me struggling towards the cliff edge.

“Leave him,” somebody in a red gown cries out. It is Million. I wrench my self free, and flee on, my chest heaving. As I run, I glance over my shoulder. They are not chasing after me, but Million is flying in slow motion over the cliff towards the road, his arms spread like a sky diver, his red gown billowing behind him, a scream tearing from his lips. The policeman who had tried to throw me down the cliff stands at its edge, his arms biblically outspread towards Million, a sunny smile lighting up his face.

I zip across the tarred road, past a tear gas cloud, the dark furry ball of an animal hard at my heels, nipping at them with sharp teeth.

A motorbike skids to a stop in front of me. I turn around, and a truck also screeches to a stop behind me. A giant dragonfly hovers overhead, its wings a blurred clatter. Dust swirls thickly around.

I feint towards the motorbike, the motorbike rider dives; I duck under his arms, and flee towards the houses, where I know there are friends. The motorbike roars alongside me. I pick up a large stone and smash it on the rider’s back. One of his arms scoops me up by the chest. With all my strength, I heave to the side, and we both tumble to the ground as the riderless motorbike disappears into the dust mist.

A large stone, gripped in a black glove, appears over my head as I lie on the ground under the motorbike rider, my terrified face reflected in the dark visor of the biker’s helmet. The old woman appears behind the helmet, wielding the gleaming machete.

“Not that way,” she shrieks at the motorbike rider, and slashes. Stone and hand fall beside my face, and the motorbike rider screams in pain.

“We have to do it the right way!” she shrieks again. In the other hand she holds the golden bowl. “He is the sacrifice, and still a mental virgin. We need his heart.” She raises the machete, aimed at my neck, her bottom lip clenched under her teeth.

I catapult up, wrench the machete from her and hack at her throat with all my strength. Blood spurts on my jacket, but she just grins, touches the horrible gaping wound, and it vanishes. I scream in terror, the machete

clattering to the ground from my fingers.

My friends appear from the houses, carrying stones, yelling fiercely. The old woman and the motorbike rider turn to flee.

Dumo is in front, wielding an assegai. When the motorbike rider and the old woman see him, they stop fleeing and laugh, clapping their hands.

“Brother Dumo!” they both cheer him. The old woman places the bowl on her head, wearing it like an oversized Gestapo helmet.

I look at Dumo. He winks at them, also grinning, and then turns to me.

“They are only afraid of other religions,” the informer advises me, placing an arm over my shoulders. “You must join a religion different from theirs, otherwise they will eventually get you if you are fence sitting. This is not a game, it’s war brother – take it from a friend.”

I press pieces of silver into his hand.

The old woman and the outrider are getting into the helicopter, and it clatters away into the sky.

My shoulders drooping, I head for the bottle store.

A Matter of Statistics

Wim Boswinkel

Living in Bulawayo and working in Gwanda. For the Development Worker that meant a comfortable rented house with pool in the posh suburb of Kumalo and a social life among equals, while still being able to assist the needy in the bush.

His friends and acquaintances no longer came exclusively from the shrinking expatriate community, whose members seemed to become younger all the time, but also from the last remaining bewildered Rhodesians, who had now other things to worry about than protecting their exclusive society against evils like mixed marriages and indigenous bosses. For these former colonial masters, life had become a struggle for survival; they were now quite prepared to extend their approval to anyone who could help them feel, during barbecues and school-fêtes, that there was still something left of the good old days.

In a very short time Zimbabwe had become a real African country, very black and very poor, just as had been predicted by the statistics and by the powers that had so reluctantly given up control at independence.

It was Tuesday and the Development Worker was on his first trip to work of the week. Originally he had made the voyage every day, but eventually he had managed to convince his superiors in Harare that it would be even better for the projects' beneficiaries if he spend the Mondays and Fridays behind his computer at home, a sacrifice he gladly made. After all, the interests of the poor rural masses came first for his organisation!

He had travelled for three quarters of an hour and was slightly over the half-way point between Bulawayo and Gwanda. The sun, being a bit higher in the sky now, did not bother him so much any more. When he had left, it had just risen, forcing him to squint, as he had forgotten to bring his sunglasses.

It has been calculated that, in Matabeleland, the sun was, on an annual basis, only covered by clouds during 3.5% of the daylight hours (*RMO 1978*). For the rest of the time it scoured all beneath it.

He observed the beauty of the scenery passing by. The countryside looked so pleasantly green. After four years of drought it had been raining plentifully over the last few months. People were wondering whether the

gods had at last forgiven the country its sins. There was plenty of grass again, but few livestock could take advantage of it as most had not survived the turmoil of the last six years. And although the soil was finally soft enough to be ploughed, the few remaining draft animals were too weak to be of much use. Besides, hardly anybody had money to buy seeds and fertilizers.

The drought years had a positive side as well; there had been little suffering from leaking roofs and the roads were accessible, enabling NGOs to distribute large quantities of maize, soya beans and cooking oil, all donated by the vilified West.

Now, with the abundant rains, malaria, cholera and diphtheria had returned. Many were dying from these diseases, as the once efficient health delivery system had all but collapsed, adding to the many deaths from the uncontrolled raging HIV/AIDS scourge. The hapless country had the third highest incidence of that disease in the world (*WHO 2003*). But at least the wet soil made grave digging a lot easier.

Of course, there was a police roadblock at the lay-by at the 72 kilometre peg again. Quite a few vehicles stood at the side of the road, all with South African number plates. The Development Worker slowed down and was, as usual, waved through the barrier; the officers did not want to waste time on him as there were more lucrative targets around. The number of visitors from South Africa had fallen by over 70% in the last couple of years (*AAZ, 2005*) and the few remaining ones were being punished severely for their foolhardiness. Even they would probably give up, once the planned toll-gates were set up and operated by yet another branch of the insatiable establishment.

The Development Worker accelerated his 4x4 until he had reached his normal cruising speed of 120 km per hour. His contract extension had just been confirmed and he felt relieved about it. Being well into his fifties, he could not imagine returning to his native country, to hide from the long harsh winters in a cramped apartment, among indifferent people with whom he had very little in common after 35 years of blissful separation. He had been a lifetime away.

He smiled, in the pleasant knowledge that another two years of good life were guaranteed. He would be able to continue enjoying his evenings on his verandah with a few cold beers and the men-only fishing expeditions to Binga. And he would not have to break up with his attractive local girlfriend,

whose youthful appearance facilitated his acceptance at social gatherings for which he otherwise might have been considered too old. After all, the average age of expatriate development workers stood at 34 (*UNDP, 1999*).

He reached Gwanda well before nine o'clock. It was the only town worth the name between Bulawayo and the border. The Shell station still dominated its northern entrance. A tattered billboard advertised brake fluid, firewood and ice. Once travellers were able to fill up their vehicles there and buy snacks at the same time. But those days were gone; fuel was not coming in any longer. Export revenues could not pay for it any more, since they now stood at about 30% of the level of a few years ago (*IMF 2005*), due to the arbitrary destruction of the country's production capability.

The Development Worker was not affected by this shortage. His employers could afford direct imports of diesel and petrol. They had easy access to hard currency, since over half a percent of his home country's national income was earmarked for relieving the plight of poor people in the South. This, however, was small compensation for the large benefits the West enjoyed by frustrating the Third World's economic development through the implementation of protective measures like subsidizing its agricultural production and putting up tariffs to discourage imports.

The local organization, to which he was attached as an advisor, dealt with the provision of credit for small-scale farmers living in communal lands. The beleaguered banks in the country would not risk making even larger losses and gladly left this type of financing to charitable organizations, whose understanding donors would year after year accept the arguments as to why still more funding should be made available. The principle that the next loans should be financed from the repayment of the previous ones had never worked.

As he sat down behind his desk and switched on the computer, the Development Worker thought about the reasons for this failure, about why the fund could not keep itself going. Inflation, of course, he realized, was the main cause. When somebody had borrowed 50 000 dollars for a chicken project and, after half a year, paid it back with interest, the resulting 60 000 dollars could not finance somebody else's project. 150 000 dollars would now be required. The distressed country, with its ceaselessly running banknote presses, had the highest inflation rate in the world (*World Bank, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005*).

There was also the effect of drought. When there was nothing to harvest,

the loans for the inputs could not be paid back. There had been four droughts in a row...

And then there was the recent example of the successful irrigation project whose perishable produce could not reach the market as transport was paralysed by the unavailability of fuel.

It turned out to be an office day like many others.

With his counterpart he went through the latest applications. Many were well written - the workshops on proposal writing did pay off! Most requests seemed viable, if only the rains continued, the inputs would be available and the beneficiaries would survive hunger and disease.

After a cup of coffee, he turned to his three monthly report as the deadline was near. For lunch he had his packed cheese sandwiches and more coffee. In the afternoon he organised his field visits programme for later that week. Then he replied to an email from the Desk Officer of the main donor organization that supported the programme: *The original invoices are on the way, please release the next funding on the strength of the scanned ones.* For each Desk Officer job advertised, there would be well over 300 applications from development workers wanting to go back to Europe (*DANIDA 2000*). The lucky ones, once settled in that desirable position, would usually quickly forget the practical challenges of project implementation and prove their worth by vigorously creating ingenious barriers of bureaucratic rules for their former colleagues.

It was around half past four, a bit later than normal, when the Development Worker set off towards Bulawayo. He liked to depart from Gwanda somewhat earlier as he would not then be bothered so much by the setting sun during the second half of the journey. Tomorrow he would compensate by leaving home a bit later. He would have time for breakfast on the verandah with Thembi. Although he had not known her very long, he was getting quite attached to her. She was not just physically attractive but also appealed to him because of the genuine love she showed him; she really cared. Maybe it could last this time, he thought. He had become tired of moving countries, moving houses and changing partners: since his divorce there had been at least six of the latter.

He knew that it could work if he made an effort. About 40% of mixed partnerships, where the man is white and the woman black, succeed, versus around 5% in the opposite case (*Princeton University, 1994*).

Just in time he slowed down for the roadblock at the 72 kilometre peg. Through the low sun and his thoughts of the future, he had almost missed the barrier; it could have cost him a bullet in the back. As it stood, he was quickly let through and continued on his way.

The landscape became hillier now; it was the rise from the middle-veld to the highland plateau, the healthy region where the big towns were situated.

He felt hot and longed for a beer, still almost an hour away. He would have one together with Thembi. Not very long ago, he would have visited a bar before going home, often arriving rather late. But then Thembi had not been there. He smiled while thinking of her, then abruptly stepping on the brake as he realized that he was going too fast through a steep bend. Thank God, there was no traffic on the opposite lane, otherwise it could have easily gone wrong. The sun did not help either, it hit him directly in the face; tomorrow he would not forget his sunglasses.

Maybe he should buy a house; they had never been cheaper and his small savings would be enough if he could change his forex on the black market. A house on a plot and grow vegetables and rear chickens. He and Thembi could live off that, once the contracts had come to an end. It was doubtful that he would be offered another one after this last extension. The sociologically trained young people in the Personnel Office would consider him to be too old and rigid and too biased to play any significant role in their misguided perception of development cooperation.

He shuddered, annoyed. Well, he did not need them. He would have a house and a plot with vegetables and chickens. And he had Thembi. He felt his irritation subside. Soon they would be together and have that cold beer. He could see Thembi now, how beautiful she was.

That bloody sun. O shit, was that another bend?

He was not aware of the terrible crash that followed as his 4x4 went head on into the ZUPCO bus to Beitbridge

Thembi was still there and smiled, stretching out her arms to him and he felt so light, so happy. He saw chickens and cabbages and there was beer. What a lucky man he was!

Of all employed people in The Netherlands, development workers have the highest annual death rate through accidents: 3.7 for every 1000 (*SNV 1996*).

Drinking with Hitler*

Harare, Zimbabwe, July 2000

Owen Sheers

He wears his power like an aftershave,
so thick the women about him flounder in it,
their unsure eyes switching in their heads
as they try out their smiles, brief as fireworks on the night.

Turning to me his own slides into place - a CD selected
with play pressed across his lips.
But I've heard about the burned workers' homes,
the scorched huts like cauterised wounds,

the men who cradle the fruit of their bruises,
the 5th brigade trucks that come in the night
and finding no-one in particular,
beat the first two hundred instead.

So finished with me, he turns away
to the Zambian businesswoman at his side -
film pretty, delicate among her jewellery,
long-fingered, dark and quiet.

Conducting asked-for laughter from the bar,
he leans in close, then leaves, as quick as he came
in a flourish of cards,
following his driver out of the door and into his world.

She returns to her drink, lightly touching her leg
where he laid his hand on her thigh,
before looking up into the bar's mirror and washing him away
with one slow blink of her blue-painted eyes.

**The late Dr Chenjerai 'Hitler' Hunzvi, ZANU(PF) Member of Parliament and leader of the Zimbabwe War Veterans*

Forgiveness

Diana Charsley

MaMoyo did not remember how she got home. She and MaSibanda had never expected this. As mothers on their own they had pooled their resources and survived, getting up early each day to buy produce from the market. They kept their stall neat and bright and regular customers trusted them. They were not like other vendors who hid rotten vegetables in the middle of a packet. The money they made sent their children to school and even provided occasional treats. MaMoyo's son became a policeman - in Harare the last time she had heard. Before that he had been a member of the Youth Brigade. She had a framed photograph of him - smart, serious and proud - in his uniform.

But their stall was no more. Police had swooped from nowhere. Smashing stands, they called them bad names (surely her son had not learned to say such things!) and kicked them into lorries along with the evidence: tomatoes, bruised and bleeding like themselves. A friend had protested her right to trade, pulling out her vending licence from a secret place on her body. It was torn to pieces.

Confused, they trudged back without speaking. MaMoyo only wanted to get home and shut out the world. The squatter camp where they lived looked like the rural village in which she grew up. Except for the trees. At Killarney they had to walk a long way to find poles for their homes. But they had, just the two of them, and plastered them inside and out with mud before roofing them with grass they had cut. It had cost them nothing. MaMoyo had even found a door outside one of those big houses that towered over their village. She had danced with delight at her find and dragged it home. She and MaSibanda had fixed it to the doorpost with rubber tyre hinges. These were their homes, snug and filled with memories of struggles, small triumphs and laughter. Seeing hers as they came round the corner broke through the numbness. Tears spread across her withered cheeks. I will survive, she muttered, but tomorrow, now I need to hide. She had learnt to do this before, when everything had gone wrong.

Intent on seeking refuge, MaMoyo did not notice MaNyathi until her wailing broke through her thoughts. She looked up to see her neighbour sitting on the ground in front of her house, throwing handfuls of powdery grey dust into the air that fell on her head and blanket-shawled shoulders like

ash.

“Uthini?” MaSibanda asked.

“Police,” MaNyathi’s daughter whispered.

MaMoyo nodded, she did not need to be told any more. MaNyathi sold groceries from her house, not much, just soap and cokes, when she could get them. They had been taken and even food that ’Fundisi had given her. Well, I cannot change that, MaMoyo thought as she tugged the door behind her. The afternoon light seeped between the roof and walls and framed the door. The soothing gloom reminded her of the dark caves in which she used to play, their cool granite walls and damp earthy floors.

She rolled into a ball on her lumpy mattress, encasing herself in a blanket. Surrendering to her exhaustion, the commotion outside became her dream. But the dream was the bad one she had had since she was a girl, almost a woman. She tried to change it, but MaNyathi’s groans became her own and the memories she tried to bury surfaced, as if it had happened yesterday. The soldiers in her dream looked the same as the policemen had today: looks of hatred and contempt, sneers of enjoyment at her pain and humiliation. Back then she had made herself disappear, she had left her body while they did what they liked with it. Only the pain of the bayonet brought her back to hear the soldier say he was making sure that nobody else would pollute himself on trash like her. She submitted to death, but it did not want her.

Later, when her father’s sister gave her a tree bark infusion, she thought her wish to die would be granted. But, although the pain was terrible, the baby was stubborn and refused to leave her body. The family said that the disgrace of her rape was hard enough to bear but a baby coming out wearing a red bonnet, that was too much. She was sent to Bulawayo to stay with an aunt who tolerated her for the money the family sent each month. When her time came, the baby had to be cut out of her at Mpilo Hospital. The soldier had severed her birth canal.

MaMoyo wanted nothing to do with this issue of violence. She could not wait to leave the whispering nurses with their furtive, sniggering glances and rough treatment. Her aunt carried the baby, hidden in a cocoon of blankets, back to her house, then deposited the child on her lap hissing, “Well, neither of you died, so this is yours. Look after it.”

To disobey Aunty was unthinkable, so she thrust her breast into the rooting mouth without looking. Day after day she flatly cared for the nameless child as if it were a rag-doll. But one day the child smiled, at her. It

was the first smile she had had since... since it all happened. She stared, and for the first time saw his liquid eyes, his o-shaped mouth with a sucking blister on its top lip, and his long, expressive fingers dancing in the air. She undid the nappy and looked: a boy.

“Oh, I am so sorry umntanami!”

His name? She knew. Forgiveness.

MaMoyo burst into action. She washed his clothes. She bathed. She scrubbed and polished the room until it glowed. She sang. Aunty came in and looked at her as if she was mad.

“You have to go,” she said as she turned to walk out. “Tomorrow. We need this room.”

Stunned, MaMoyo crumpled to the floor as if her body had left her dress. I was born for trouble, she thought, why did I expect anything else? But now she had something - somebody - to live for, to fight for. Even so, her head pounded with fear and pain.

MaSibanda was knocking on her door, so MaMoyo pulled herself back to the present and hobbled out nursing a boot-bruised hip. As she looked past her friend, she could not make out what was going on. It looked as though everyone was moving home.

“What is this?” she whispered.

“The police, again. We must take everything out of our houses or else our belongings will be burned when they destroy our homes tomorrow.”

“But why?”

“We are living here illegally, they said.”

“But MaNyathi and others were born here, and the council even delivered beer to that shed the miner put up.”

“They say they are instructed from Harare,” MaSibanda said, her voice dead as she drew patterns in the dirt with her toe. MaMoyo slumped under a tree. Through tear-filled eyes, her home shivered and shook.

“Well if they come they can take it,” she muttered, “I am going back to bed.”

In the morning MaMoyo followed her usual routine. She woke MaSibanda, “Livukile, you lazy woman!”

MaSibanda groaned from inside her house. “Sivukile, what are you doing?”

“Going to the market of course.”

“For what? Uyahlanya! You’re mad! Go to sleep.”

How could she have forgotten? She sighed and kindled a fire to heat water. Its soft blue smoke curled gently towards heaven. In the predawn gloom she could pick out mounds of belongings piled near the roofless structures of her neighbours. Stripped roofing and doors, along with wardrobes, made the walls for new open-air rooms. As the sun came up bodies surfaced from under perishing sheets of black plastic. Piles of children awoke, giggling, enjoying the new experience.

The dawn sun reflected off crumbling, dawn-chilled mud walls with a soft brightness. Now the piles of possessions could be seen clearly: bedding, domed chicken cages fashioned from sticks and bark, a wheelbarrow, plastic drums for carrying water, neat, fat bundles of new thatching grass. MaSibanda’s granddaughter, in her uniform, washed her face with the warmed water.

“You sending Siphiwe to school, ma?” a neighbour inquired from the next homestead.

“Of course, her education is her future,” MaSibanda responded

“Ours are staying home. What if the police come and you are separated?”

“Then I will leave all this,” she indicated with a broad sweep of her arm, “and run to the school to get her.”

The children laughed to think of someone that old running.

Several days passed. The police did not come. ’Fundisi came instead. He listened and prayed and helped. Some went to town with him to make plans; Nyathi wanted to get his daughter’s school fees back for bus fare to Tsholotsho. Those who remained waited as if a heavy storm was about to break. Each day Siphiwe returned from school. Maybe the police had forgotten or were busy with something else. People started to talk recklessly.

“If they come I will beat them with this and bite with this,” boasted an old man waving his stout walking stick and pushing his lower jaw out to expose his only tooth which gleamed as if delighted with the idea. He tottered back onto his stool wheezing with mirth.

“They destroyed my rural home twenty years ago so I came here. Now they want to send me back. First they must build me a house like the First Lady’s!” cackled MaSibanda, parading with a plastic bowl for an oversized hat. MaMoyo slapped her friend’s outstretched hand, in appreciation.

“You see,” said MaMoyo, “you moved home for nothing, in a week or so we will even have our stall back. Let’s see what tomorrow brings,” she added heading towards her house for the night

Someone was beating on her door again. MaMoyo lifted her head from under her blanket. She heard running, and voices, and a smell. Smoke. She scrambled to her feet and pushed open the door, nearly knocking over something. She stepped back in fright. She had seen the police dressed like this a few days before: uniformed in blue from head-to-toe, tough black boots, a short thick rubber stick and a helmet as blank as a locust’s eye. Its shiny hard plastic hid his face, but she saw her own, startled, set against the stark, black outline of her house and behind it, flickering orange. She tore her stare away from the policeman and looked to see MaSibanda’s thatched roof burning fiercely.

She turned back to the policeman. He had gone. Strange, she thought, but she had no time to think about him. She had to rescue her property. There was no one to help; each household had its problems. She dragged out her mattress and piled on top of it pots and plates: bedding and clothing hurriedly stuffed into an ancient suitcase; a stool, a small table and a chair; a plastic drum; the photograph of Forgiveness, her most precious possession. The wardrobe and the door remained. She could not get the door off, so she wrestled the wardrobe through the narrow doorway.

Unexpectedly she felt a crack of pain across her shoulder. She thought she had injured herself.

“Leave that! You were warned!” barked the policeman. He had returned; another officer stood to one side, watching.

“Shame on you! I am old enough to be your mother!”

MaMoyo crumpled as he hit her again across her shoulders. He then kicked her repeatedly in the ribs, in a silent rage. As she lay there, too sore to move, he put a match to the roof and marched off, kicking and trampling the photograph as he left. Burning thatch fell down onto her shoulder forcing her to stagger towards her things. She lay over them, trembling, watching the door and the wardrobe join the roof in a tortured dance, hot and red. As the walls fell inward with a dull, heavy thud, the red-hot roof collapsed on top like a shroud.

MaMoyo did not know how long she had lain across her property, like a hen protecting her chicks, when a shadow fell over her body.

“They have gone umngane wami. Get up now.”

MaSibanda gently pulled her groaning companion to her feet. Her skin, oozing and swollen across her ribs, was tender; it hurt to breathe. The shallow valley of their village hung heavy with dirty smoke that muffled the wails of a small child sitting dustily amongst the rubble. Its mother ignored it as she worked steadily, shattering the brickwork of her house with an iron pole. Murals, daubed in wild bird colours of rust black and white, could now be seen by anybody walking by.

“Why is she doing that?” MaMoyo whispered.

“They said if it was not destroyed they would burn her property.”

“Uh-uh, this is not a country,” MaMoyo murmured, as her gaze widened to take in other families doing the same thing; the monotonous thud made her feel sick.

’Fundisi was moving through the village offering shelter at the church. Some children went, but the adults stayed to guard what had taken a lifetime to collect. MaMoyo and MaSibanda shifted their belongings together for comfort and protection, building up one side to protect themselves from the biting wind. The wardrobe would have been useful; MaMoyo smiled a moment at her private joke. With their mattresses together and Sipiwe in the middle, they nested her with their bodies. As she lay, staring into the dying fire, MaMoyo drifted off. She dreamt that she had saved her wardrobe and was feeling relieved. But, as she admired it, it burst into flames and collapsed. Standing in its embers was the policeman. The plastic shield on his helmet slid back like a taxi door. The hidden face was revealed. MaMoyo was instantly awake, sweating.

“O-o, Forgiveness, not you!”

Another Day

Albert Gumbo

Monday

The gardener came and knocked on the bedroom window early in the morning. Irritated, Trevor, shirtless, went to peer outside. He had already warned the gardener not to ever do that again and, still drowsy from sleep, he groaned, "What is it Sekuru?"

"They have stolen the gate motor."

The words hit deep, colder than the morning breeze. He looked through the window across the green expanse of lawn as he tried to make out the anti-theft cage, but it was in vain. Trevor threw a gown over his hairless chest and, not finding his sandals, slipped into his wife's slippers. He walked slowly to the gate, as if the slow pace would somehow make things different. Perhaps by the time he got to the gate, Sekuru would have proven himself to be an old fool again. Sekuru was always drunk at the weekend and perhaps the fumes in his head on Monday morning had betrayed his eyes. Besides, what kind of a burglar would strike on a Sunday night? It was the day of rest for heaven's sake. The absurd thought was quickly dismissed when he remembered an Indian proverb: *When a pickpocket meets a saint, all he sees are the pockets*. His hopes were dashed when he saw the anti-theft cage ripped open. Denial was replaced by anger as the bile began to slowly seep into his conscience.

"Bastards!"

Trevor worked hard to give his family a comfortable lifestyle. He had toiled to get where he was, from a childhood of poverty, and he did not take kindly to people who deprived others of their due rewards. He stared at the empty cage as if to will the damn motor back in. The gardener looked silently on. Trevor turned around slowly to walk back across the lush green lawn to the house. As he neared the front door, it opened and his wife emerged. She was clad in the red silk gown that he had bought her at the airport duty free shop in Mauritius. She was a beautiful woman who kept him grounded. She took one look at him and his face confirmed it all. The motor was gone. She took his hand and walked with him back to their bedroom. They showered together and agreed that she would take the boys to school while he went to make a report at the local police station, less than five minutes away.

Trevor picked up his laptop and walked to the garage. Their four month old Alsatian leapt up and down around him. The shower had not washed away the bile and he unfairly told the puppy off - first for not having alerted him to the burglars and secondly for making his longs dirty with its dusty paws. The moment the puppy looked sorry for itself, he felt angry with himself and that only served to help the bile spread a little more in his psyche. In front of the police station was a roadblock where the police peered into people's cars looking for arms of war. Elections were coming up later that month and the police appeared keen to forestall any trouble. It was interesting, Trevor thought to himself, how the cops always had resources to prevent political trouble, but limited ones in stopping crime.

He walked into the police station. It needed a coat of paint. An A5 notice clinging desperately to a wall exhorted the public not to buy stolen goods and ended with the slogan: *Lets fight crime together!*

In response to Trevor's announcement that he had come to report a theft, a policeman asked him to take a seat. Sitting on the floor were two men, who looked like gardeners, being interrogated by all and sundry how they happened to be in possession of a large amount of money. One of the policemen was philosophising on how he could see through any lie and was advising the less talkative of the two to come clean about whatever crime they were alleged to have committed. Trevor was not particularly interested in human rights, interrogation, privacy or anything of the sort that morning. He caught the attention of a policewoman who feigned surprise, so his bile told him, that no one had attended to him. Trevor quickly told her what had happened and she pulled out a crime report form and made him repeat his story. The bile rose a bit faster and he had to calm himself to endure questions about his age, ID number, address, the discovery of the theft and the time he had gone to bed. When he stated the estimated value of the motor, in response to the question, the policewoman appeared to raise her eyebrows in disbelief. He remembered advice given to him long ago by a friend in time to keep quiet, "Trevor, there are two people you never argue with. A drunkard and a policeman."

Trevor was glad to leave the police station. He opened his window to let the morning air in as he drove to the office. He hoped the inrushing air would blow away his anger but, as he grit his teeth against the cold air, he simultaneously felt his anger growing. When he got to the office, he asked his personal assistant to obtain the obligatory three quotes that every insurance company insisted on. An hour later the quotes had been faxed and

Trevor called to make an appointment with his insurance broker. He glanced at the quotes as he waited for someone to pick up the phone and his bile, which had temporarily been forced down by his morning tea, surged like flood waters again. The replacement cost was five times what he had told the disbelieving policewoman and each quote was valid only for three days!

At a committee meeting that night, when he told his NGO friends about the theft and the replacement cost, they laughed at him and said he could put the money to better use by helping to sponsor a programme for the poor. Trevor reacted with anger and reminded them that they drove around in 4x4s using donor money, while he worked his backside off to make money for his company and was adequately rewarded for it, thank you very much! That shut them up and for a while the bile receded as he drove home.

Tuesday

Trevor walked out of the management meeting with his ears ringing at the bad news that the foreign currency application for his trip to Cape Town had been turned down. The Central Bank did not consider his trip important enough on a national scale and they did not think the itinerary he had supplied justified his request for traveller's cheques. He found a note waiting on his desk asking him to call home. The maid had called. The bile tide was coming back in slowly.

"The electricity is gone," announced the maid, no doubt unhappy that she was not going to get her tea. He asked her what had happened. Had there been a noise? What had she been doing when the power went off? Were all the switches up on the mains?

"It just went," came the helpful reply. Trevor dialled the ZESA faults line. Two numbers went unanswered until he came to a magic line that was answered within two rings. He was given a reference number and told someone would work on it. He thanked the man on the line as the bile subsided. "Something works," he thought to himself as he hung up. Three hours later, his personal assistant announced that his son was on the line.

"We are hungry and Josephine has only made boring sandwiches."

"Ask her to warm up the pizza for you."

"There is no electricity and we can't even watch cartoons."

"Where is mum?"

"Jason's mum dropped us. Mum is in a meeting at school."

The bile made a swift return as Trevor reached the phone. He dialled the magic number and the same voice responded. He gave his reference number

and was told someone was working on the problem.

“I was told that three hours ago.”

“That is correct, but our guys have lots of faults to attend to. They will get to your house.”

“After how long? At what time can I expect them?”

“I can’t say but definitely before the end of day.”

Trevor decided not to retort that the world was still waiting for the second coming. Perhaps he should not argue with ZESA help desk operators either. Trevor drove home in time to find his family driving out.

“Where are you off to?”

“Did you call ZESA?” came the reply from his wife.

“Don’t tell me there is still no power.”

“We are going to cook at my sister’s. The boys will do their homework, bath, eat and then we will come back.”

“But they told me they would fix it before end of day. I have been trying to call you. Did you forget to charge your phone again?”

His wife looked at him sheepishly and he feared what was coming.

“Stolen.”

“How? Where?”

“I left it in the car.”

Trevor sighed inwardly and told his family to carry on. He was going to phone ZESA and wait in case they showed up. After asking exactly where the matches were, he drove into his yard, pressed the remote, remembered, stopped, got out cursing to close the gate behind him, got back in his car and almost drove over the puppy that was only too happy to see his master back. He dialled the magic number again.

“I was told by a Mr Chokwadi that your people would come and sort out my problem before end of day. It is six o’clock now, my kids are starving and I am sitting in the dark. What is going on?”

“That was another shift sir. Can you tell me what happened?”

“I have no power. It is as simple as that. You are the experts, you come and tell me why!”

The new voice seemed to know how to deal with bile overdose.

“I understand your frustration sir. The truth is we do not have fuel.”

“I will come and pick you up right now.”

“Firstly, we are not allowed to get into private cars and, secondly, the technicians have already gone home.”

“But you just said it was a new shift.”

“Yes, but you see, when there is no fuel, we just take the reports of breakdowns. The technicians go home at five. We suspend the 24 hour service because we cannot get around.”

“So what do you expect me to do? You will not accept lifts and your technicians are waiting for Jesus to come back.”

The new voice laughed hesitantly and suggested that Trevor donate some fuel. The bile turned to hot lava as Trevor fought the tremendous urge to slam the phone down.

“Sir, my name is Tendai. I am on duty until ten tomorrow morning. If you can bring just ten litres of diesel in a container tomorrow, I will make sure the team comes straight to your house. You know the situation in the country and, unfortunately, we are asking all our customers to do the same. We are trying our best sir and I am sorry for your family.”

Wednesday

Trevor's personal assistant walked apologetically into the office and announced that the suppliers of cellphones were refusing to fax quotes. The cost of letterheads was too high and they knew that the person requesting the quotation would be unlikely to buy from them anyway. Trevor had hoped to deliver the fuel to the ZESA offices and, from there, go to the insurance brokers and hand in claim number two for the week. He sighed, gathered his keys and drove to ZESA in the city centre.

At a roadblock, they asked him for his radio licence and he asked them to give him a ticket without any sarcasm. The policeman let him go.

At ZESA he was shown through a parking lot to an office that was filled with what looked like giant bolts. In a corner stood at least five twenty litre containers of fuel. Trevor announced that he had brought fuel to enable them to attend to his electricity problem. As soon as he gave his reference number, the gentleman behind the desk apologised profusely for the mess, shrugging his shoulders in the process. He added that ten litres was too much and that five would be more than adequate. The bile subsided. There were still good people in the world, Trevor thought to himself, as he promptly donated the extra five litres to an air force officer who had arrived to make a report, but had not had the good fortune to be advised about the fuel problem. As Trevor waited for the technicians to empty his fuel into a truck and follow him to his house, a young woman walked in. The gentleman behind the desk brightened up, broke into a smile and hugged his daughter.

“Congratulations!” he exclaimed. His daughter had just passed her

driving test and he shared the news with everyone who was in the office. Trevor's bile completely disappeared. There was no denying a proud father his moment of joy. He announced to his embarrassed daughter that her mum had already slaughtered a chicken and they would watch her eat the whole thing later that night.

Trevor drove out following the ZESA truck to his house feeling lighter. The African sky had turned grey announcing impending rain that was always welcome in Zimbabwe. The city took on an even more beautiful look as motorists switched on their lights adding to the festival of colour. There is a lot more to life, Trevor thought to himself, as he gave some change to a street child at the robots.

Pay Day

Pentecost Mate

Somewhere in the streets and avenues of my city, there is the screeching of brakes accompanied by wild insults and vulgar curses. There is the swishing of women's dresses, the flying of men's ties and the luring of customers by vendors selling fruit and vegetables.

"Bananas! Bananas! Bananas from South Africa!"

"Cabbages. AFCON specials. Support the Warriors! Warriors' fundraising. Buy from me and support your team."

It is a shower of activity on the pavements of Bulawayo. There is a man clutching *uMthunywa* under his left armpit. Under his right armpit, a copy of *The Chronicle* peeps through. He is reading a story from *The Financial Gazette*. Beside him are his three hungry children chewing ice-cream cones. The children seem to admire their father for being able to afford to buy three newspapers. It is pay day for civil servants and only teachers from the diaspora (the rural schools) put on appearances to try to impress their wives and children by buying them food that is alien to their everyday diet.

Queues in and outside building societies and banks are long and winding. Stress-filled faces characterise people in the queues. They are mostly quiet because there is nothing left to talk about. They have talked about price rises, about shortages of basic commodities, about the changing laws and rules that govern them, about the taxes they pay.... They have talked about the fuel crisis... about power cuts, water cuts.... And about salaries below the poverty line, about the huge sums of money they owe.... Some people cannot keep quiet and just burst out to tell strangers in the queue about their experiences.

"My neighbour is a witch. How can she knock at my bedroom door while I'm still in bed with Gugu's father, only to remind me to pay for the *Dark and Lovely* I took from her? She thinks her *Dark and Lovely* is more important than my husband? Nx!"

"Talking about that, my landlord threatened to evict me if I do not pay this month's rent in foreign currency."

Such is the talk I'm listening to as my queue moves, slowly, grudgingly, like a pregnant snail. The tellers work as if the battery systems in their bodies are about to collapse. Perhaps they enjoy the spectacle of so many people in so many different outfits. Their change of expression is

mechanical. As they speak to each other, they smile. When they turn their faces to their clients, they frown.

The aroma of freshly baking bread pervades the path of my nostrils. Outside the next door bread shop, there is another stagnant queue. A replica of faces and body postures might persuade an observer that the second line is merely a reflection of the first. The faces are long and sad. It is as if they are waiting for body viewing at a funeral. A student in one of the queues looks at his watch irritably and moves away, leaving just enough space to the old woman behind to shift and sigh. Besides this movement, the queues look dead, as if the people in them were planted and not watered the previous night.

Back inside the bank, disaster strikes around mid-morning. The rural electrification programme means that electricity sometimes goes to visit the rural folk. As a result, the computers have just gone down. The tellers place their much adored sign 'CLOSED' in front of them. One beautifully hair-styled teller sips leisurely at her tea. She hisses each time she sips, sometimes whistling if the tea does not follow the stream of air into her mouth. She is content.

An old woman, white-haired, walks with a stoop into the bank. She is carrying what appears to be a locally manufactured bag, designed from sacks. She spreads out her Java print material at the centre of the banking hall, takes out her flask of tea and her cup. She pours tea into the cup and we all look at her. She struggles to bring the cup of tea to her mouth. Her peeling lips are red and they quiver now and again, beckoning to the cup to come to the lips. She fails and she places the cup down gently. Her skin pigment looks blue-black, with patches of mounds that rise and collapse with each breath she takes. A belt of gritty, whitish, pus-filled pimples make her look as if she has been resting on a grater.

The second attempt to lift the cup to her mouth also fails. She curses. Her frizzy hair rests on her bony head, looking like a wig made of twists of burnt grass. We all continue to observe her actions. She tries scooping the tea with a teaspoon and manages to draw it to her mouth.

"Why did I not think of this earlier?" she says to no one in particular. "Now the tea is cold. I don't drink temperatures, I drink tea."

She stands up and hobbles over to the tea-sipping teller and mumbles something that we can't hear. The tea teller laughs and calls, in an English accent, to the teller next to her. Both tellers laugh and attract the attention of their companions. In a few minutes, most of the tellers have gathered around

the sickly old woman, laughing. Meanwhile, in the queue, we all await the return of the electricity, but it does not honour our wishes. The old woman is entertained by another cup of, presumably warmer, tea, which she chews at dramatically as if it has bread inside it. She belches and smiles.

Three armed security guards rush into the bank carrying a metal trunk. They make their way to what seems to be the financial manager's office, where a fat man allows them in and closes the door. Soon after, pushing and shoving breaks out at one point in the queue, followed by a fist fight between two men. The tellers' attention shifts to the free show. The old woman, gifted with the obscene language of touts, lifts her dress and hurls insults at the fighters. The people in the queue are amazed at these antics.

The security guards, now out of the manager's office, but still carrying their trunk, manage to manhandle the pugilists out of the bank, where they shove them unceremoniously into the back of their truck. The old woman, meanwhile, picks up her belongings and follows the men out of the bank, continuing to shower abuse at their retreating figures. When she reaches the back of the truck she is hoisted under her arms by two of the security guards and thrown after the fighters. The vehicle drives off amid protests by the on-lookers, one fuming, "Why do they treat an insane old woman so badly. These born-free security guards are inhumane. They have no respect for their elders."

Talk of the old woman and the fist fight keeps the tellers occupied. Then the flickering and eventual gleaming of television sets, provided to keep the people queuing pacified, announces the return of electricity. The queue straightens and those who have abandoned it rejoin. The slow paced serving of customers resumes. After only serving a handful of customers the beautifully hair-styled teller places her CLOSED sign on her desk and walks towards the financial manager's office, perhaps to collect more money.

Opening his door she lets out a glass shattering scream, "Maye mina!"

Those of us near enough to the opened door can see the bulky figure of the manager, bound and gagged. Panic and confusion now grip the, so recently slothful, counter staff, who now rush about like frightened cockroaches.

No one attends to us now; the bank is closed for the day. We abandon the bank for the shower of activity in the mazes of our city, avoiding anyone to whom we owe money. We will return and queue again tomorrow.

Native

David Goodwin

I wake to a siding that
Dad, old railway man,
Could have labelled instantly
From the time
And from the slow, build-up of hills –
'Shangani', I can just make out – the sand platform
Has the name picked out in stone.
A red-roofed station building, cream walled,
Is made of tin and set on blocks, for ants,
The Remington is in a bright room,
The syringa, gum and pepper trees
Are in place, and beyond –
Dim bleached grass,
A darkly steaming pan,
The almost-black of thorn.
The yellow diesel whistles forward,
A silver tank glows dawn,
A cow-ramp passes,
Made of worked rail lines –
An overkill, no Tuli bull
Could bend a bar that's borne
Countless tons of smoking, steaming train.
Behind, an impossible peach tint
Detonates to daylight
As sun breasts a hill.

To exchange all this
For the last stop before the Antarctic!
For two native mammals (bats, at that!) –
Only tenable from
This last rung before queer-street,
Only now, in sight of the looming skids –
Six years, we'll give it,
Sort out tertiary for the kids,

But, in those sour dawns,
Over and over,
I will forge
Africa's signature.

Tearing the Curtain

Bhekilizwe Dube

This is my sixth quart of *Lion Lager*. I am beginning to get drunk. I hardly ever drink these days, beer, like everything else in this country, being so viciously expensive. Being unaccustomed to it, it hits me hard, setting me in a maudlin mood. I try to go easy, taking dainty sips, I don't want to get too drunk tonight - no, not on this night.

Delani is getting drunk too. His eyes are bright, his gestures, as he speaks, sharp, energetic, sweeping. He looks robust and confident. I would too if I were he. He is a successful visual artist. His catalogue at the exhibition was impressive, listing all his achievements to date. I have forgotten most of them - it was a pretty lengthy exposé. He has been an artist in residence in California and in Boston, and has had exhibitions in some pretty classy galleries in England, Spain, Italy, South Africa, Germany, France.... As I said, he is successful. Very, very successful. My lucky friend, for whom the world of art is icing on his cake. I must admit I am a little envious. I am just a high school English teacher.

We have just come from his exhibition, 'Tearing the Curtain, AIDS Exposed', at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in Bulawayo. The exhibition has been funded by the World Health Organisation and was opened by the South African Ambassador to Zimbabwe. It has been featured in all the major galleries in Southern Africa; this exhibition in Bulawayo is the last in the series.

Delani and I both studied at the University of Zimbabwe for Bachelor of Arts General Degrees. He majored in Visual Arts, whereas I majored in Literature in English. After graduating in 1998, he went to South Africa to pursue an art career. He was an illegal immigrant; South Africa is not generous with work permits. I became a teacher and teaching is a thankless and lowly paid profession globally, and is the pits in this country. Believe me, I don't enjoy teaching. All the young seem to care about is television, bloody television, their lack of appreciation of the literary arts is just depressing.

After he left we tried to keep in touch, we emailed each other regularly. I remember those emails with nostalgia. In this country, whose leaders have immersed me in a numbing torpor of poverty and despondency, his emails were a refreshing whisper of things better, things possible, things beckoning.

I went with him, in those emails, through the most powerful economy in this poverty-bloated continent. With him, I saw the vast conglomerate of successful businesses, businesses churning, day and night, millions, billions of rand. With him, I experienced the promise of the business world, the art world, the entertainment world, the book world, the scientific and technological world - all the best in this continent of gloomy shadows of nibbling penury. With him, I saw the thousands of immigrants - bitterly resented in South Africa - all flocking to the one place on the continent that offers any hope of success, hope of a better life. Yes, I remember those emails. I have not forgotten the visions of squalor he created in my mind about the black face of South Africa, reeking of poverty, want and hopes of material emancipation. With him, I saw the squatter camps in Thembisa, Alexandra, Soweto, in virtually all of black South Africa. The potency of the dreams of these hopefuls, the gloom that sucked at the potency at times, all these I felt through the computer screen. The longings of these squatters, for brick houses, for electricity, for decent toilets and bathrooms, all these were smudges on the made up face of South Africa. And yet, in spite of all these negatives, South Africa still appears like a glowing gem to most of the rest of Africa.

Yes, I do remember those emails. Those emails that allowed me, for a few merciful moments, welcome respite from thoughts of the dire situation we Zimbabweans are in. The emails, after two years of constant contact, suddenly fizzled out. We lost touch for four years, for four years my emails went unanswered. And now, here we are, together, at Bulldog's Pub, six years since we last met.

He is smiling. His eyes are gentle, the sentimental look in them moves me.

"Tshomie, it's good to be with you again."

He shakes his head from side to side, disbelieving the moment. It has been a while. I am glad too, to be with him. I smile, I am all warm inside.

"Let's toast," I say, lifting up my glass. "To friendship." He laughs softly as if afraid his breath will bring the walls of the bar crashing down on us.

"To friendship." I am happy. The glasses chink and we drink. He sighs, smiles - he looks happy too. Humans can be strange sometimes. I don't know why, but sometimes the subconscious drags an ugly reality to the front of a person's consciousness and upsets them just at the moment they seem happiest. The subconscious is a classic sneak. I suppose that is what is

happening to him, one moment he seems so happy, the next stricken and sad. I am disturbed. I lean forward, almost knocking my glass over. I am concerned.

“Are you ok?” I ask.

He starts, smiles, vaguely embarrassed. He seizes his glass, the beer almost sloshing out down the front of his shirt. He gulps it, his Adam’s apple rippling. He sets the glass down and smiles, the embarrassment and the sad, stricken look gone.

“It’s ok, tshomie, let’s just drink and be happy.”

I sip my beer. I put my glass down and stare at him questioningly. I am dissatisfied, suspicious, concerned. He does not meet my eyes. I shrug. What can I say?

“Tell me about South Africa.”

“What about it?”

“How did you make it down there?”

A wistful look creeps into his eyes, tinged with a distant look of awe.

“South Africa?”

“Yeah.”

“Me, making it?”

“Yeah.”

“I was lucky,” he says. “South Africa is a tough country. It’s not easy making it there. There are so many immigrants. You can’t believe it man, when you’re down there, multitudes of desperate Africans from all over. South Africa is the Athens of Africa. It is the single bright spot in a dark continent, for now anyway. Nobody knows when it will cease to be. Nobody knows when it too will become affected by the continent’s canker - corrupt governance. It’s a bloody difficult country. You have the cops who give immigrants a hard time, they hate us, they say we bring AIDS, we steal their women. We sweat for shit wages - hell, so many things they pelt at our benumbed skins: fear of the cops, hunger for a job, loneliness, yearning for acceptance - they all benumb you. Did I say I was lucky? Yes, I did. I was. You remember I told you I got a job in no time, in just eight months. Eight months after I got there, I was working in this private college in Kempton Park. They paid me badly, two thousand five hundred rand a month. It should have been at least four thousand. But what could I do, I was a foreigner and illegal at that? I had to take the crumbs, lick them and, miraculously, grow fat on them. At least with that cash I was able to bribe Home Affairs officials for an identity document. I paid three thousand rand

for it. With that, I was safe from the crusading cops. My pay was also enough to allow me to buy, over six months, all I needed to work on enough paintings to launch a solo exhibition. I worked hard, at night, on my art. I sweated on the canvas, dripped blood. I caressed the canvas with my mind, kissed the brushes with a nascent longing for transcendence, brought to life images, dreams and hopes. It took me a year to finish those first works. I wanted them to be perfect - an expression of me, an expression of my perceptions of being, an expression of my longing for purpose and meaning in my life, an expression of my desire for immortality. When I was through, guess who I went to see? The director of the poshest gallery in Johannesburg, in Rosebank. I took with me just one painting. Believe this, tshomie, the moment she saw it, she stood still, frozen, I could tell that straight away she loved it. You can guess the rest. We went to Thembisa to look at the rest of the paintings I had done. She raved about them and arranged for an exhibition the next month. I made a fortune - six hundred and fifty thousand rand for my first exhibition. A damned fortune tshomie. I became, and still am, the darling of the art world. The critics say all sorts of nice things about my work. It's all luck, tshomie, being me, being born with the talent I have, being in the right place at the right time."

He smiles, but his look is distant. It stares in the face of the past, the future and timelessness. It flirts with the present, which flickers in his eyes as shadows of happiness. Also, farther away in his eyes, far away, at the very margins, there is a sadness, a hazy cloud of misery. I see an ominous portent of doom. What ails him, I wonder?

"I must order."

He leaves for the bar, looking a trifle unsteady on his feet. The waiters and waitresses are busy, it being a month end, waiting for them is futile. Chiwoniso is playing on the radio. The bar is full. It is not a rowdy bar, its patrons are the sophisticated elite of the city - they have civilised ways and their conversations, beer loud though they are, are also, for beer drinkers, subdued. I never drink here. On my teacher's salary, I can only dream of drinking in a bar like this. Why...

"Have a drink and quit looking like you are staring into the cosmos."

He is back. I gratefully reach for the glass of lager he offers me.

"You didn't take long." I am wiping the froth from my upper lip with the back of my hand.

"Yeah I didn't. The bar lady is lovely, and I am lovely - she caught my eye and my look, we sort of understood each other - a very special physics it

was.”

I laugh and take another sip. He is sitting down now, drinking from his glass. He puts his glass down and licks the froth from his upper lip. He considers me gravely. “Tell me, how is it here?”

How is it here? Hell, how is it here? I blink, stare at him, shrug, and sip my beer.

“The papers say that it’s bad. Tell me.”

What must I say? He has been away for six years. In those years, things have gotten bad, really bad. How do I tell him of our poverty-bleached lives? Of the smell of cabbage and thick porridge daily? Of our eyes that furtively and longingly look into supermarket windows - at the alluring goods beyond our means? How can I tell someone who has not been through it of the hunger for a better life that stares through our eyes with boulders of longing? Can I, to one who has not felt it, talk about the despondency of living in a sinking country, a country run by a cohort of old men and women too crass to admit failure? Fossilised elders who have smothered us in a coarse blanket of poverty and despair - how can I make him understand? How can I communicate our bitterness - the bitterness we feel when the western world leaps ever forward in boundless strides of material progress, while we, stupefied by hunger, fall to disease? Above all, how can I make him feel the sadness, the pain, the yearning and the desperate, crushed longing for dignified lives, decent food, decent clothing, decent housing and a hopeful future, which pervades the bulk of us, we who skulk in the frigid shade of fate’s disdain. How can I make him understand all this?

He understands. Silence says so much sometimes. He nods. He is sad.

“It’s that bad?”

“Yes.”

We do not say anything for a long time.

“Come with me.”

I say nothing.

“Get the hell out of this sinkhole”

There is an edgy urgency to his words. Still I say nothing. I stare into my drink. My finger caresses the rim of my glass. I wish I could caress my being, stroke it to a tender warmth. It is jagged, cold, brittle, breaking.

“Tshomie, I’m sorry I’ve been out of touch. Hell, I am. I sort of, you know, got carried away. I mean, hell, listen, you see, you can sometimes get lost in your success, I mean, hell, bullshit. I was out of touch, I am here now. Let’s move to South Africa. I can get you all set up. Get out.”

He is uneasy. He smiles at me. His smile is pleading, shaky, he wants me to trust him, to believe that he can help, to forget his lapse. He's ok. He is my friend. He always has been. That's why we are together tonight. He emailed me and invited me to the exhibition we have just come from.

He is my friend. I can count on him. I grin. I squeeze his nose gently.

"It's ok. I understand."

He smiles. He looks shy, chastened.

"Thanks man."

Who talked about going easy on the beer? Surely not me. I am taking it hard and fast now. The prospect of leaving for a more open and progressive society excites me. I want most keenly to distance myself from the fossilised elders who run this country. I want to distance myself from their time warp. I want to...

I start. What is this?

"Are you ok tshomie?"

He is crying. Silently. Tears are coursing down his cheeks.

"Are you ok?"

I reach for him clumsily, upsetting his glass. Thankfully, it is empty.

"What's wrong man?"

I am panicking. I have never seen him cry. Never. Silent tears, a remote look in his eyes, pained remoteness. He looks broken, defeated. I hold his hands in mine. I squeeze them. I am pleading, horrified, concerned.

"What's wrong man? It's ok. It's ok."

I am still squeezing his hands, holding on, praying that he will stop crying. I am leaning over awkwardly, my back is beginning to ache. We stay in that position for a long time, until he stops crying. My back is numb. I am glad that he is still now, he just looks helpless. He gently pulls his hands from my grasp, fumbles in his pocket and brings out a handkerchief. He wipes his face and eyes. He smiles weakly and I smile back.

"This is the only time I have cried since I was twelve. I hope that it's the last time."

He laughs weakly. He puts the handkerchief back into his pocket. He knots his fingers over the table. I am still smiling. I hope to calm him somehow by smiling. My smile hides my consternation and confusion. It's ok, I tell myself. It's ok.

"Only you could make me cry. Only you."

He stares vacantly. He smiles, distantly, composed.

He blurts out, "I am HIV positive."

There is nothing more to say. I lose count of the glasses of beer we drink. I lose track of time. We both do. We just pour it down. Down into the gut. We drink to knock ourselves out. We drink to fuddle the world away. To forget. To push away the pains, to drench the blaze of fear, to scare away the haunting demons.

It does not matter that they will always be there, always, staring through our eyes, glowing on our brows - always there. Only tonight matters. Tonight and killing this terrible mood that has seized us and blurring the sight of what we see through the torn curtain.

We have to be persuaded to leave the bar, most politely. It is deserted. We are the last to leave.

We are unsteady on our feet as we leave. We are leaning on each other, propping each other up. It is warm outside. All the posh cars that were parked outside are gone. Only Delani's rented VW Jetta adorns the parking area. We stumble to it. We stop short of it.

"Six years!" He is shaking his head incredulously. "Six bloody years, four of them burning man, burning."

"It's ok man. It's ok."

"Six bloody years!"

"It's ok tshomie."

"And, and... and I could have died, perhaps you too could have died... yet, I live, we live."

"Yeah. We are still alive."

"Yeah, fuck everything, we are still alive."

"Bloody Africa! Fuck it man, what doesn't it have?"

"It's shit man, shit, but we'll survive."

"Sure man."

"Sure."

We stare at each other, daring to hope.

"It's good to be with you."

"Same here tshomie. Same here."

"Damn it."

And suddenly we are crushing each other in a fierce embrace. I feel him trembling. Or is it me who trembles? Is it both of us? My cheeks are wet. My throat has a hot choking lump in it. I am crying. It's been years since I last cried, but tonight I weep. And tonight, holding on to each other, swaying drunkenly, we have seen out of the torn curtain. Tonight we are afraid. And yet, tonight, we also hope.

Home Sweet Home

John Eppel

When Grant Terrier heard that his father, Foxie, and last remaining relative in Zimbabwe, had died at the Edith Duly Home for the elderly, he decided to revisit his past, and attend the funeral for which, since his father had become destitute, he had to pay. All Zimbabweans who relied on pensions to support them had become destitute, and those who weren't kept going by the Western Union simply turned their faces to the wall and died. Very few actually drank insecticide or packed their grizzled heads in SPAR plastic bags and left them there. Most simply stopped living.

When James 'Foxie' Terrier retired in 1995 his monthly pension amounted to the princely sum of \$10 000. He was rich. He was a paid up member of the Bulawayo Golf Club. He had accounts at Haddon and Sly and Highfield Pharmacy. Once a week he dined out at Maxies or New Orleans. What more could an old man want? Ten years later that same monthly pension bought him one third of an English cucumber.

Grant was a Kitchener High old boy, so his first trip down memory lane, after the funeral, was to that august institution, in a Bulawayo suburb called Lobengula. Grant had played first team cricket and hockey, but the sport at which he had excelled was squash (he still proudly wore his Colours blazer on special occasions), and Kitchener High was the only school in Bulawayo, which, in those days, boasted a squash court built to international standards. The funding had been provided by a deeply committed Parent-Teachers' Association.

Grant decided to walk from the suburban guest house where he was staying, and this partly prepared him for the shock to come. He made his way along cycle tracks, which had become obstacle courses, and diagonal dirt paths strewn with litter by the binful. There were as many crows in the sky as there had been storks in his school days; as many rats in the grass as there had been hares. A smell of damp ash lingered in his nostrils.

School was in session when he got to the main gate. The same sign, barely legible on a surface of rust and dents and peeling paint. Hundreds of children were milling about, unsupervised but well behaved on what, in Grant's time, had been called the Top Field. It was now a dust bowl. So was the Oval, the erstwhile First Team cricket ground. Except for a few curious looks from idle pupils, Grant was able to wander about the grounds

uninterrupted. Memories flooded his consciousness, the unpleasant ones taking him somewhat by surprise. Top Field was where fights took place, and where new boys had to run a gauntlet of leather cadet bootlaces, wet towels, and stockings filled with sand. Top Field was where, Saturday after Saturday in the miserable winter term, the pupils, dressed in their Number Ones, were obliged to watch rugby and scream war cries until their throats ached and their straw-bashed heads pounded.

Only one of the eight tennis courts was still operational, and that, barely. The all-weather surface was cracked and potholed, and the white markings had virtually disappeared. (He remembered the hours he had spent over weekends playing ball-boy for the terrifying prefects). On either side of a pitiful rag of a net six boys, three to a side, were having great fun with a single smooth - cracked, if the low bounce and hollow sound was anything to go by - tennis ball. The olympic size swimming pool looked as if it had been empty for many years. There were certainly many generations of frogs, rats, chameleons, lizards and beetles, decayed, dead, and alive, on its cracked and peeling floor. Grant quickly pushed aside a memory of being almost drowned there by a serial bully from Shabani whose name he did not care to remember.

While Grant was shaking his head at the once magnificent school hall, now in a sad state of disrepair, a gentleman dressed in a tailored three-piece suit approached him, introduced himself and asked if he could help him in any way. While Grant explained his business, the gentleman withdrew a white handkerchief of a silken texture from his trousers pocket and proceeded to dust his Italian-style leather shoes. His hair, Grant noticed, was sleek with vaseline, and on the second finger of his left hand was an onyx inlaid gold ring. Dapper was the word that occurred to Grant Terrier.

The gentleman returned the handkerchief to his pocket and then held out his hand for Grant to shake - the African way - which always caught Grant unawares, resulting in a bungle, and that made him feel vaguely guilty. "You see," said the gentleman, "things are far much better now."

"But..."

"Our schools are open to everyone; not the privileged few. We are now having democracy. All are equal."

"But why is everything so run down, Mr O'Magate? I mean, check this hall. When was it last painted? And what's happened to the swimming pool, the tennis courts, the playing fields...?"

The head smiled patiently before replying. "Money, you know, is in

short supply. There have been successive droughts. Your people - Blair... Bush - have imposed sanctions on Zimbabwe. They are punishing us for giving the land back to its rightful people. We are struggling against an imperialist conspiracy to keep us subjugated.”

“The farm invasions took place only a few years ago. Kitchener High School looks as if it hasn’t had any maintenance since Independence.”

“That is an incorrect statement, but however, this is not the time for quarrelling, Mr Grant. Perhaps you, as an old boy, will find a way of acquiring paint for our buildings.”

“Some years ago I sent a thousand Australian dollars to the school for the express purpose of maintaining your squash court. I’d heard that it was being used as a lavatory. You spent the money on a workshop!”

“By the way! Ah, but it was before my time. That must be Mr D’Mpofu, who is now late. But you are wrong about the squash court, Mr Grant. It has been converted into a cottage for our maintenance engineer, Com... er... Mr FitzNcube.”

Grant asked the head if he could look around his old hostel, Arsenal House. Mr O’Magate, distracted by the arrival of a beautiful young woman (teacher? parent? secretary?) with an exposed navel and a Cleopatra style hair piece, gave his permission, and Grant wandered over to the place that had been his home for six years.

Only the first three letters of the proud old name could be made out; and the word ‘house’ had lost its ‘s’ and part of its ‘u’, so now it read ‘hole’. Grant had been Head of House in his final year. He wandered through what had been the junior prep room. A few photographs of boys and staff still clung dustily to the walls, including one of his first year at Kitchener High. There he was, twelve years old, looking like a frightened rabbit. He recalled most of the seventy odd faces, including the serial bully from Shabani. What was his name? Some of the old tables were there still, around which the boys had not studied for many a test, not completed their homework assignments, not written letters home; but had carved their names, splashed ink, and fiddled with sharp instruments.

After some searching he found his grandfather’s name, ‘Yorkie’, dated 1914. Then he found his father’s name, ‘Foxie’, also dated: 1939. At last he found his own name, so deeply carved that the ‘S’ in ‘Staffie’ had gone right through the table top. It was undated. His surname was incomplete: ‘Terr’. The hostel master had caught him in the act, and beaten the living daylights out of him. “I hope this will teach you a lesson, young Terrier,” he had said

before commencing the onslaught.

“That I must not vandalise government property, Sir?”

“No. That you must not get caught!”

When Grant ‘Staffie’ Terrier walked pensively away from his alma mater, he was accompanied by the words of a song, not from his own lips, though he had sung it often as a child, but from the school choir, which had assembled in the quad outside the dilapidated hall, and which was being conducted by no less a personage than the head, Comrade ‘Mister’ O’Magate:

Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam,
Be it ever so humble, there’s no place like home;
A charm from the sky seems to hallow us there,
Which, seek through the world, is ne’er met with elsewhere.
Home, home, sweet, sweet home!
There’s no place like home...

Not very tunefully, Grant picked up the refrain... “no place like home... there’s no place like home....”

Itekiya

Godfrey M. Sibanda

The naked child materialized from the bush and walked with determination towards us. My wife gave me an uneasy glance and moved back a step. Perhaps she thought the little one was from the other world. According to the map, we were deep in a game reserve, hundreds of kilometres from the nearest human settlement.

The boy stood before us and pointed at the meat we were braaing on our solar-powered stove.

“Itekiya,” he demanded.

It was a word that neither of us understood, but the meaning was clear: he wanted some meat. I placed some boerewors, a T-bone steak and salad on a paper plate and handed it to him. He dropped to the ground and began chewing at the meat with molars his little jaws shouldn’t have had. When the meat was gone, he sniffed at the salad and threw it away. Then he began gnawing at the bone with diligence. I handed him a second plate of meat, but he pushed it back into my hands and gave the bone his full attention.

I tried all the greetings I knew on him, but he responded in words we could not understand. With the food forgotten, we speculated on who he was and where he was from. As a medical doctor, my wife made her observations from a distance and surmised that he was no more than five years old and that he was a healthy, well-developed child with all his senses intact. His hair had been recently cut and there was only a trace of grime on his body, implying he had recently been in contact with other human beings. We had read of children abandoned in the wild and reared by animals, but no baboon could cut a boy’s hair and teach him distinct words such as ‘Itekiya’. Perhaps his parents were lurking in the bushes, waiting for us to go so they could retrieve their child. The total lack of fear he displayed towards us indicated that he was no alien to humans, and that the humans he knew were of a kindly disposition.

This is what we surmised as we picked at the meat and salad, and, before we were through eating, the little boy was spread-eagled on the dust, sleeping as if without a care in the world.

“Where do you think he is from?” my wife asked.

“His language is definitely not from southern Africa.”

“So what do we do now?”

“We could take him to the next town, find out if anyone knows anything about him.”

“What if his parents are nearby? You never know what ancient tribes still roam the bushes among the wild animals.”

It was a preposterous suggestion, but instead of saying so, I threw the question back at her.

“So what do you suggest we do?”

“We go back to the entrance of the reserve and inquire if there’s been a report of a missing child who speaks a foreign language. West or central African, I think. They’ll know what to do next.”

“You’re asking me to leave a child at the mercy of lions and hyenas?” I shouted.

“This picnic spot looks quite safe to me. Let’s leave all the food and water behind, perhaps a blanket, too. That way he’ll have no reason to wander off into the bushes. He’ll be OK until the next person comes along.”

And that’s what we did. The naked boy was still snoring slightly as we abandoned him at the roadside picnic spot in the game reserve. Nothing was said as we drove to the entrance, where there was a tourist camping site and a small compound for game rangers and their families.

You could read the disbelief in the game rangers’ faces when we told them of the child. In the five decades since the reserve had been commissioned, no man, woman, or child had been found wandering in it. The large population of lions, leopards and hyenas in the reserve were known to be particularly vicious. As for the word ‘Itekiya’, perhaps it was a childish attempt to say Ethiopia? This provoked a round of mirth that raised my wife’s hackles, and she demanded that they radio the police, which they reluctantly did. The cop on the other end was not too interested either, and he made a vague promise to “come and investigate the issue further in the next few days.”

“What can we do in the meantime?” my wife asked. “The child is still out there among the animals and all you can do is make jokes about it.”

“Madam, that’s where you found him and left him, isn’t it?”

“Yes, but I’m beginning to suspect that, had we brought him here, you’d have said he was the child Jesus. Worse still, you’d have accused us of child theft or something like that.”

“You are now being rude to us, madam, and there’s no call for that. But look at it this way; it is six in the evening, and you ask me to go into an animal reserve at night to look for a boy you could so easily have brought

along yourself. Where do I get the fuel for that? Who pays me the overtime? Besides, what evidence do I have that this is not a childish prank?"

"My word is all the evidence you need, sir. I am a medical doctor and..."

"Your profession has nothing to do with me. Do you have any photos of the child with you? Any video recording?"

"No, but..."

"But you have a video camera hanging from your neck, madam, and a camera phone in your hand. So why did you not tape the whole affair? You know what they say about a picture being worth more than a thousand words."

"Listen to me, sir. We have come here to make a report..."

"And I'm telling you what can be done, and what cannot be done. If you feel so strongly about the child, go back and fetch him and we'll take it up from there. If you don't want him to soil your expensive vehicle, do us the favour of videotaping this naked boy in the bush."

Fuming, my wife stormed out of the game rangers' offices and it was left to me to utter a few conciliatory phrases, to show my teeth in a smile, and to offer some monetary incentive so that an armed game ranger could accompany me the next day to look for the child. When I got back to our vehicle, my wife's rage had increased a hundred-fold.

"They will help us look for the boy tomorrow," I reported.

"How did you convince them to do that?"

"Kind words work better than naked aggression."

"What kind words could you say to people like that? Did you offer them bribes so they would help us?"

"It's not us they seek to help, but the child. And if I gave them an incentive to help, what's wrong with that? After all, they are just lowly paid civil servants."

"Sometimes I hate the way you do business, father of Mzi."

"Unfortunately, that's the only way business can be done in this country, and you are a hypocrite to pretend you don't know it. Take yourself, for instance. When you get a call from the public hospital at midnight, you don't run as fast as when you are called to your private surgery where you get paid twenty times more than at the hospital. Money talks and you know it, mother of Mzi."

"The money from my surgery enabled us to take this holiday, father of Mzi, and don't you forget it."

War had been declared. It carried on late into the night as she railed on and on about the lazy, stupid and corrupt civil servants of this land. "Ask them to perform their duty, and they will ask you – what's in it for me? What material dividends will I get from doing this for you? If you don't bribe me and I sit on my hands and do nothing for you, what consequences will I face? If the top civil servants themselves who earn billions of dollars a month - if they let the people starve and do nothing but incarcerate those whose stomachs grumble too loudly, why should I act any different? If you have no money to give me, just take your troubles elsewhere, or, better still, keep your lips sealed, for silence and inaction are the only virtues that rule in this land. If a man jumps a queue, don't bother coming to me for support – just nudge him out yourself or surrender to his will. Why bother with a child that is not yours, why burden yourself with a duty that has not been placed in your hands? This is the philosophy that rules our minds in this country, and it's men like you who encourage it with bribes."

The following morning we picked up an armed game ranger and drove back to the same picnic spot, but the boy had gone. Our blanket lay among the remains of the food that was scattered among the baboon shit. Zebra and wildebeest were grazing nearby, and we heard the laughter of hyenas somewhere in the distance. But there was no sign of the boy. His footprints had been obliterated by the baboon dances, and we parked the car and walked over every blade of grass within a radius of ten kilometres of the picnic spot, but still there was nothing.

In the evening we drove back to the city, to the house and sons we had long considered our source of comfort, well-being and strength. For weeks we circled around one another, waiting for something to happen, but, if the boy was ever found, nobody bothered to inform us. In autumn, my wife packed her bags and left and, as I say this, I'm driving towards the ghost of the child who ate our meat, gnawed our bones, snored in his sleep, the boy who cursed us with a word that will forever remain imprinted in my head - *itekiya*.

The Matriarch

Wendy Blakeley

On silent giant feet
invisible
she comes

weight and wisdom
grace and strength

Who am I to argue?

Costume of tattered ears
and baggy pants

So old

Tip-toes her tons over
The garden hose

Nose
beyond conceit
 a hand, a foot, an extra eye
 tickles and tastes
 picks up a twig
 uproots a tree
 does things too fine for me

Quietly I move on

Or don't.

Depending
 On her mood.

The Harare Hermit

Tinashe Mushakavanhu

I am in Harare.

Harare on first impression is one big insane asylum. It is disgusting. I don't understand how anyone can ever get used to living with filth and dirt, continuous noise, thickly polluted air, and the people, most of all. Ninety percent of them are rushed, angry or talking to themselves, yellow cigarette butts hanging out of their mouths.

As I melt into the Harare crowd, I become defensive. I take on a Hararean consciousness. Everyone in Harare is a potential thief, not so much by design or want, but by some inexorable circumstance. I look at some of the faces. Sad faces. What keeps Harare people going is the bare desire to live, to survive. People in the crowd silently pass each other, somnambulists seldom speaking, moving in single units like a broken army walking away from war, cheeks sunken, eyes dead with fatigue. Harare faces reveal sickening symptoms of sadness and despair.

Harare streets look dirty, dirty of unattended piles of rubbish and roads full of potholes. Her huge towering buildings stand out of fumes emitted by the streets of feverish traffic. Harare with her petrol scented streets, the fetid stench of hot, hurrying humanity and, over all, the grime, grime unspeakable, Harare's grime, from which there is no escape.

I keep on walking with no specific destination, unconcernedly taking a palaver with my prostitute Harare.

Harare is the most deceitful lover. She sits like a bitch on heat in Fife Avenue, thighs spread-eagled, showing her naked soul. She alluringly whispers, her face hidden, enticing thousands like me, who become victims of her caprice. Some she at once crushes beneath her cruel feet, others she condemns as factory workers, a few she favours and fondles, riding them high on the bubble of fortune, then, with a sudden breath, she blows the bubbles away and laughs mockingly as she watches their helplessness.

I see more deep sombre faces. I wonder what secret thoughts they hide, secret thoughts swarming, seething, chattering like millions of bats in an underground cave, rustling beneath the surface of the day like cockroaches in summer. Unintentionally, the secret thoughts slip out as people shout, scream, swear and whisper to each other. Harare is bursting at the seams. I keep on walking.

Harare, the city of urgency. People push and shove in a rush, mechanically marching in every direction. Pulling through is what Harare people do. There is a kind of bravery in their lives that isn't bravery at all. Harare life rattles on mechanically and there is less and less meaning in its motor-hoots and, in all the noise, all meaning is drowned.

In Harare, no person cares for another person. There are many blind people in Harare, blind parents being led around by their ragged children. There are the disabled who sit on street pavements with empty begging bowls hanging in their limp hands. No one cares to drop alms in them. I don't care.

In George Silundika Avenue, a plump woman in a fading green dress, with CITY OF HARARE boldly written across it, sweeps dirt on the pavement. She has a stubborn monotonous zeal, rapid strokes that pull the street dirt towards her until she forms a small pile, then she bends, scoops with bare hands, rises and empties the dirt into a wheeled, black plastic bin beside her. She pauses.

Thick throngs of humanity hurry along the clean pavement. I am one of them, rushing to Africa Unity Square near Herald House – the propaganda factory. I stretch myself on the luscious green grass, and, at once, someone begins to yell. I turn to look and there is a stout young man, wearing a chequered green shirt, green chinos and black suede shoes. In his left hand is a large open bible. He is shouting. I distinguish the words Christ Jesus and repentance. I stare at this poor preacher, bringing, he thinks, God to Harare's heathen. Harare people do not care; they do not look at him, they stand on the pavements, sit on the green concrete benches or on the grass like cows in a field at noon. He is flies. Harare people ignore flies. They twitch their heads and gaze about them. It is lunch hour. I oversleep.

Tired and bored, I pick myself up, ready to go to the Highfields pick-up point at Market Square. My body feels light with hunger. I am dizzy and my vision is blurred. I start walking slowly and am nearly run over by a car while trying to cross Second Street. Harare is turning a blind eye to me. It is

getting dark and night is already descending like a giant's eyelid closing. Neon lights blink.

Market Square is filled with sour-smelling humanity. It looks like a roving monster, its insides continuously churning, writhing, knotting and distending. I survey the long queues and the shoving savagery of the crowds.

I join the Highfields queue and wait until the bus comes. Rush hour traffic is building up already, hooters bleating loudly and drivers hollering insults at each other. Sitting in the old bus, I look out through the cracked window to see a long queue of cars moving, slowly. Harare life in slow motion.

As the bus hurtles out of the Central Business District, I can smell Harare, her smell floating in through the cracked window. It is the smell of too many people breathing the same air, of sweaty hopeless lives. The bus is speeding well over the regulated limit and the ride is a torture of numb dread and suffocating despair.

HIGHFIELDS. A signpost reads. The signpost is like any other put up by the Harare City Council to identify different areas. It has a blue background with block white lettering, and an equally impressive Chibuku advert on the reverse side. High fields indeed. The Chibuku advert is a big brown container with frothy beer proclaiming ghetto happiness – *munomuHighfields tiri bho-o*.

A few moments later, Machipisa Shopping Centre rushes at us with human faces blurring past. When the bus stops, I drop off and walk towards Manjoro Supermarket. I see queues in almost every corner, every conceivable place, everywhere. Soap queue. Cooking oil queue. Bread queue. Mealie-meal queue. Petrol queue. I am tired.

Harare, a city of nightmares, queue nightmares. Even in their sleep, Harare's dreamers have nightmares of queues. Queues make up Harare. Without seeing queues, bureaucrats out of their 10th floor offices seem to think that they have no power. Harare and the making of small dictators.

After buying a few goodies – *mabuns*, margarine, *matemba*, jam *nemasamba* – I move away swiftly from the crowded shopping centre, drifting away, declaring myself. One moment I am part of the hurrying crowds, the next, walking away nakedly apart, alone. Highfields is now calling, calling me, first wooingly, then more and more stridently towards her cradle, to rest.

I am exhausted, but what fuels me to forge ahead is that I am a few

metres from my grandmother's place in the Zororo section, the oldest part of Highfields. I am approaching home. 4596. A deep gully runs in front of the house. Near the gate is a puddle of murky, noisome water and waste matter pooled, still, thick, appalling like foul soup that makes a hungry person nauseous. On either side of the narrow street, moated by these stinking gullies, live people. I jump smartly over the trench and walk into the yard and knock. Gogo opens the door and yells ecstatically, "*Titambire, titambire Chiranduwe-e...*" I do not manage to reply; my bag slips on to the ground and splays my few groceries on the floor, everywhere. A dizzy spell envelops me. I collapse in a heap, silent.

Harare's heartbeat does not stop. Life goes on in Harare. Harare might go to sleep late in the night, drunk, violent and rowdy. But in the small hours of the morning, she wakes up, yawns away her hangover and prepares herself for another uncertain day.

The Road

Cornelus Sanders

The green lawns, that once surrounded the TB hospital, had turned into desert and the flower beds, that had ameliorated the suffering of the in-patients, looked like rubbish heaps. I had been employed in this place for seven years and had seen it all deteriorating. An increasing number of in-patients occupied the beds that refused to multiply and, therefore, patients naturally spread over the floors. The suffering of the patients oozed from the walls. The oozing was constant so no paint stuck to these walls that were forever flaking. Nurses were underpaid and scarce. Drugs were increasingly in short supply. 'Out of stock' was not a call to arms or protest but the standard morning call of resignation that reverberated through the wards. The hospital spilled its corpses into the overflowing morgue and eventually into the deserted flower beds. Notwithstanding their desperate situation, the patients tried to preserve their decency. They struggled hard to convince everyone, including themselves, that they had the 'good TB'. The 'good TB' was TB1, not TB2. Patients would do anything to obtain a diagnosis of TB1 to avoid being stigmatised and ostracised. TB2 was actually that disease that one could not talk about, HIV or AIDS. TB2 was caused by evil spirits, while TB1 had just descended upon us humans from the damp air and the morning cold. Everyone knew that.

The morning rounds had dragged themselves a long way into the afternoon, with endless rows of diseased men and women, skin and bones, with feverish sparks of hope in their eyes, and bodies ready to collapse from their infections. The best thing I could do was to give them a diagnosis of TB1 and try to keep them comfortable. The nurse told me, without blinking an eyelid, that painkillers were out of stock and then asked me to speak to an old man who had come to collect the body of his son. I did not realize I was leaving the beaten track.

I sat down in the doctor's office and looked at the man who stared, absentmindedly, out of the window, watching the traffic along the busy road.

"Good afternoon," I said. "I am sorry about your son. He was very ill when he came here last week and the medicine that we could give him did not help." I paused, pondering the diagnosis I was going to write on the death certificate.

"Was it AIDS?" he asked. I hesitated with my answer. I hadn't heard this

frank reaction before and he caught me off guard.

“You can answer me,” he said, with sincerity in his voice.

“Your son died of AIDS,” I said, “and we have no medicine for that.”

Looking at me with his staring gaze, he said: “You brought us AIDS.”

After that remark the silence hung heavily in the air, a weight descended on my shoulders and hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

“You brought us AIDS,” he repeated.

Visions of competing CIA and KGB labs, developing horrid microbes for their warfare, rolled through my head.

“Well, if you mean that I personally imported AIDS into your country, let me reassure you that all I am trying to do is to treat...”

“We never heard about AIDS before you came along.”

The superpowers would have used these microbes for their biological warfare on the African continent, while keeping its people ignorant and in perpetual poverty. Microbes had spread among the general population, gradually destroying these innocent bystanders.

“You brought us AIDS but have not brought your medicine.”

Or the fairytale about these microbes put in contaminated vials and distributed during vaccination campaigns in Africa. I had heard these stories before.

“You brought and taught us about AIDS,” he whispered.

I took a deep breath, since this conversation was not going in a direction of my liking.

“And that is alright,” he said.

“You know about the spirits of our forefathers that guide us during our life, or sometimes stand in our way and wreak havoc,” the old man continued.

I nodded my head.

“I have lost my eldest son and, before you brought us AIDS, we would say that ‘evil spirits’ had caught up with him, or that maybe he had done something to upset the good spirits. We would ask the medicine man and he knew what to do, sometimes.”

I was still thinking about biological warfare and now spirits entered the story as well, making me even more confused.

“With our young children we always wondered whether this child was going to stay or leave again after some time in our home. We are not used to older children leaving us behind. I never thought that I would see my eldest son leave. I assumed I had seen enough children leave.”

The old man stared out of the window. "Maybe it is like the road out there," he mused.

I wondered out loud: "What is like the road out there?"

"The life we are leading," he replied. "You travel along the road from here to there without knowing where to go or what direction to take. Things pass you by, but you are not sure if you should cling to them or push them away, just like people in your life who may come and go, without warning or purpose."

The pot-holed tar road was teeming with cars, buses, bicycles and people. "Before they constructed this road there was only a small dirt track," the old man continued. "The road construction was not meant for us but for the mines further on.

"Never before or after have I seen so many workers tearing down trees, levelling ground and working big machines. Some of the workers stayed and eventually helped to build this town.

"The road suddenly changed our life and ended the isolation of this remote corner of this land. It brought prosperity. Shops appeared along the way while cars became a regular sight.

"My father said that real men were meant to walk and summoned me to help him with his shoemaking business. We started to make sandals from used car tyres and I have been making shoes ever since. This road gave us plenty of raw material. I can spot the difference between a Goodyear and a Bridgestone tyre from a distance." His calloused hands were lying in his lap. "The sluggish feel of a rundown tyre," he muttered, looking down, "and my hands putting in new life. Another pair of sandals ready for the road.

"The road has brought me my wife along with her sisters. We were much in love. But after many years she left in agony, after a week of fever and moving things in her tummy. That doctor also said he was sorry. I think it was due to a witch who preyed on lovers at night. Once you are possessed those evil spirits make you crazy and leave you paralysed or dead."

I could see that the pain was still there, but life did not pause for him. He told me that he had married his wife's sister and his children were well looked after by his new wife. However, over the years, they fluttered from the tree like leaves after a thunderstorm.

"I have lost all my girls and two sons," he said. "We tried to take good care of our children, but how can you keep the thunderstorm out of your backyard or make sure leaves stick to their branches? We used all the potent medicine to comfort the good, or fight the bad spirits and we watched out for

witches. The doctors in the clinic claimed victory once in a while, just to lose the battle some time later.”

The road had brought Father Conlon, who carried Jesus and built a church. He smoked two packets of cigarettes a day while taking care of the lepers in the settlement, constantly complaining about the injustice of being sent to this godforsaken place. The reason why God had left was not immediately obvious since everybody tried very hard to contact him by prayer throughout the week and especially during Sunday mass. But lepers are known to consume spirits so probably God had vanished into their community. That’s at least what the medicine man was saying and he sometimes knows. Despite all the prayers the old man’s children still left one by one.

“So this road has brought me my wife and children and now they say it has taken away my children.”

“Who says so?” I asked.

“Those people who came to my house and told me to take away my tyres. They said that tiger mosquitoes lived in my tyres and they had given the evil spirits to my children that made them leave.” He looked at me in disbelief. “You know that we tried our best to please the spirits but apparently our medicine was not strong enough. We still have evil spirits that take away our children. Often they take away the young children and not the old ones. They were meant to stay. No person in the world is strong enough to bury his own children, except those that are comforted by good spirits.”

The tears in his eyes reflected the many good spirits that he had needed in his life.

“And now my eldest son has also left,” he mumbled.

As I watched his children fall from his hands like grains of sand, I was beginning to feel lost in his presence. I said that I was sorry for his misfortune.

“Oh, it is not that, that you should feel sorry for,” he said.

“This road of life that we travel from birth to death has so many secrets and surprises and so little guidance. In life there is no magic that is suddenly revealed to you on how to live your life better or with fewer worries. There are good spirits that put their hands over your head for protection or arms around your shoulder and we call that love. This is what you have for your wife or children. The lesser spirits are what we call compassion and of course we show that to our friends and relatives. Most people that you meet

along the way have to make do with the sympathy that you are prepared to give to them.”

I felt utterly incompetent, and told him that I wished I had more medicine to help out.

“Oh, but the medicine is all in you.”

I stared at him in confusion.

“You are showing me respect by sitting here with me and listening to my story.

“I don’t need your pills. I need your attention. We have come to the end of this little bit of road that we travelled together. It is your being here, taking a moment in time to let me talk and give me your ear that goes well with you. With that you took some load off my shoulders and carried me a little further down the road. Although you cannot bring me my children back, I will be less tired when I arrive at the end.”

The Silent Prince

Pathisa Nyathi

The man sat pensively, his restless hands constantly moving. Glistening beads of sweat rolled down his face. Although his head was bowed, he was listening intently to the conversation on the other side of the curtain. The hard chair on which he sat was now moist as a result of his sweat.

The Drill Hall in Bulawayo is a huge building of impressive Victorian architecture. As the name suggests, the building belonged to the British South Africa Police who held their drills outside the hall. Close by are other government buildings, including the Memorial Hospital and the native commissioner's offices. The office was generally referred to as Komsitheli, after the first native commissioner in Bulawayo, Mr. Herbert Taylor.

The man hidden behind the curtain in a room in the Drill Hall was Prince Nguboyenja, a son of King Lobengula, the last Ndebele king. At the demise of the Ndebele state, he, together with Prince Njube and Prince Mphezeni, was whisked away by Cecil Rhodes to the Cape Colony, ostensibly to receive a western education.

Rhodes had other motives. The Ndebele people had posed a serious threat to his grand plan of establishing a British sphere of influence stretching from the Cape to Cairo. He had to resort to war to dismantle the Ndebele state. The last thing he wanted was to see the resurrection of that state.

Only sons born to Lobengula when he was king qualified for the throne. The eldest of the three eligible sons dispatched to the Cape Colony, Prince Njube, died in 1910. Nguboyenja was now the eldest among the eligible princes. He was set to become the rallying point in the efforts by Ndebele elders to install another king.

The colonial administrators had other ideas; they intended to thwart any efforts to resuscitate the erstwhile Ndebele monarchy by fomenting division between the royal family and the chiefs.

Since the chiefs were on the pay roll of the colonial masters, some of them were happy with the new situation and did not support the revival of the Ndebele monarchy.

The plan of the colonial administrators was for these chiefs to meet to express their views about resurrecting the monarchy. It was assumed, of course, that they would express their opposition to the idea. Meanwhile,

unbeknownst to the chiefs, Prince Nguboyenja was invited to sit behind the curtain to listen to their conversation.

The agitated and flustered prince sat in the chair like one awaiting the fatal fall of the guillotine. He was almost breathless as he craned his neck to follow the animated conversation on the other side of the curtain.

Prince Nguboyenja was not new to intrigue and machinations. He was an intelligent man and had received legal training in England, which would have put him in good stead as king of the Ndebele people. Would all his aspirations to rule be dashed by the chiefs' deliberations?

The moment of reckoning came. Tension within the royal prince rose as his heart beat rapidly. The chiefs, having been plied with copious amounts of whisky, began to open up in praise of the white man and his philanthropic rule. The colonial officials in attendance enjoyed being lavished with eulogies of inebriation.

"We, the sons of brave men, men who saw battle on numerous lands and brought glory to our king, shall stand firm like our fathers. When we speak, we have spoken. When we sleep we turn, albeit unconsciously. But when we speak, our word is as firm as rock," said Chief Ntola Khumalo of Mzinyathini.

"Tell them Khumalo! You of the brave tribe, sons of the penis sheath. We never turn back, never ever. Now life is very sweet, we find ourselves between the back of a woman and the cradle," another chief responded almost incoherently in a drunken stupor.

The native commissioner realized that it was then opportune to introduce the subject of the revival of the monarchy. "Chief Khumalo, I observe you are happy with our rule. Very good, indeed. In the circumstances, would you, if given some choice, want to revive the rule of the Khumalos?"

"Hail Nkosi! Never ever Nkosi. Only the British beat us in battle. Tshaka we beat. Dingane we beat also. The British Nkosi, those are men like us. We are happy under your rule," said Chief Ntola.

"Yes, Chief Ntola, I know about your military exploits and I know too your people's penchant for beating about the bush. Shall we return to the subject at hand?" The native commissioner was anxious to get the chiefs to start the song of denial. He was not disappointed.

Prince Nguboyenja went pale with anxiety, anger and disappointment. His lips became dry and cracked like mud in a dried pool. His eyes were bloodshot and suffused in tears. How dare they praise those who had subjugated him and his people? In his agitation he almost tipped his chair,

which would have revealed his presence.

“When I speak Nkosi, I speak. I fear no man in this world except the British and their children like you, Nkosi. That house, we don’t want to hear about it anymore. Finished, du du Nkosi. Not anymore. They ruled us with a heavy hand, with a hammer and axe Nkosi. We the chiefs do not want to associate ourselves with that house again.”

Chief Ntola had bared his chest and spoken what was in his heart. The other chiefs applauded him. Behind the curtain, the prince was completely shattered. Any saliva in his mouth evaporated, leaving his mouth a desiccated ruin.

“Mthengisi, pull the curtain!” boomed the exuberant native commissioner. Among his fellow white officials, he was a hero, a master strategist, destroyer of the Matabele. The chubby Mthengisi was the messenger at the native commissioner’s office. The messenger, wearing the trademark broad brimmed hat for messengers, saluted his boss and jumped to obey the command. He pulled the curtain open, exposing the beleaguered wreck of a prince.

Mthengisi was shocked. He knew Prince Nguboyenja and his status among the Ndebele. For a while, Mthengisi was immobilized, only to be brought back to his station by the reverberating boom of the more powerful master’s voice.

The confusion of the chiefs, when they saw the prince who epitomized the rule that they had just denigrated, was portrayed in their faces. There was silence.

The native commissioner seemed to relish the scene. His satisfaction was complete when he looked at the wreckage of the man slumped in the chair. Prince Nguboyenja, the name meaning skin of a dog, never spoke again.

For the rest of his life Prince Nguboyenja was a recluse. He lived in a house near present day Sunnyside, a suburb in Bulawayo. Manja Khumalo and his wife MaHadebe attended to him, cooking for him and doing his laundry. Whenever he wished to communicate, he wrote on a piece of paper and Manja would read aloud the message.

On occasion, the lonely prince received visits from Ndebele royalty, amongst others. Two of King Lobengula’s surviving queens, Chibile Maduma and Moho Thebe, paid courtesy calls on the prince. Whenever they visited, he faced away without saying a single word.

When he died in 1944, his corpse was taken to Entumbane Hill where his grandfather King Mzilikazi’s remains are interred. Poet Ginyilitshe

Hlabangana was in attendance to give a fitting and moving send off to the spirit of the heartbroken prince who went silent.

The Request

Adrian Ashley

Confidence drew his pen to the top of the page. He lowered its nib slowly, counting the handwritten figures under his breath as he went along. Halfway down, his problem intruded upon his mind again. He abandoned the count. 'I have to plan my affairs better next time,' he thought, leaning back. He sat behind a small desk in a dim corner of a cavernous warehouse. Stacked to the roof, and stretching from wall to wall, blue and white bags of fertiliser stood in orderly batches. 'Why do these things only happen to me?' he thought bitterly. Then he composed himself, shook his head as if to rid his brain of clutter, and began the count again.

It had been this way all morning, ever since he first dragged open the heavy warehouse door along its squeaky runners and walked around the dust-covered concrete floor on his inspection. The image that stuck in his head was one of his wife, curled up under the covers, her forehead shiny with sweat.

"I need to go to the doctor," she had said, where previously she had bravely declared that she could bear the pain.

Two days had passed since she first told him about her discomfort. He had been hoping it would go away, but it hadn't.

He had stalled. "I think it might be worse if you move about. Just lie still and it may pass." But in his mind he was guilty. 'How can I possibly tell her?' he had thought. Then he headed off for work, leaving his wife to bury her face in the pillow. Once outside the house and down the street he had stopped under a tree, opened his knapsack, and pulled on his new shirt.

It was that very shirt that had killed off the last of their money. When first he came upon it in the window of Abdullah's Fashions, the shirt had done an amazing thing, it had spoken. In fact it had not merely spoken, it had sung to him. He had been taken by its colours: sky blue with diagonal orange lines flashing across its front like lightning. It had stiff cuffs and a high, jaunty collar. The shirt had sung, and he had given in. And the price! Only half a million dollars, which he instantly knew was a bargain as he had seen other shirts of the same kind fetch a million. How could he not have bought it?

That was just the problem. That was the reason he was broke. He leaned forward now and attempted the stock count again. Midway, his eye caught

the fine weave of his shirt cuffs and was drawn to its beauty. ‘What kind of machine weaves together these threads?’ he wondered. ‘And how fast does it do them?’ With great effort he dragged his attention back to the present. He needed money, it was as simple as that.

Just then, Gumbo, the stores supervisor, entered the warehouse. He was a clumsy looking old man with a large head and drooping lips. The entrance was twenty paces from where Confidence sat. Gumbo approached in his laborious, shuffling way. When he came to a stop at the desk, wheezing slightly, Confidence wasted no time in asking, “Can you lend me some money?”

Gumbo drew his eyes appraisingly over the new shirt. Then he snorted, his lips quivering slightly. “Ha! Where do you think I can get money at this time of the month? You young people need to learn the value of a budget.”

He dropped a sheaf of papers on the desk. “Here, tally yesterday’s figures!” He was about to head off when he said, “You know, the young are unschooled. You keep your head in the clouds all day, you speak very little, and when you open your mouth it is to ask for money. Hmphh!”

Half a million dollars was all he needed. It wasn’t a crazy figure – not any more, the way things were changing. In fact it would be enough to pay for his wife to see the doctor, as well as to buy her the chocolate biscuits she so craved since becoming pregnant. When Gumbo disappeared into the square of sunshine that came through the warehouse entrance, Confidence stood up and headed for the door.

Despite his preoccupation he still felt a little taller than he did most days. He was holding his shoulders higher. He even extended his steps as he walked along, feeling in every way worth a lot of money. ‘Worth a billion dollars!’ he confirmed to himself. ‘Worth a bolt of lightning!’

His good friend Zee worked in the adjacent warehouse. Confidence knew that if Zee had any money he would lend it to him. His heart sank when he found Gumbo sitting at Zee’s desk. “Your friend has not reported to work today!” Gumbo announced, answering the unasked question. “Now I have to sit here to move things along. You know, the young are unreliable. Zee is absent altogether, and now you have left your post. Come on, go back to work!”

Once at his desk he attempted the stock count again. He got the bags to tally, but when it came to preparing the report, something he usually did immediately afterwards, his concentration flagged. While scribbling idly on the back of a piece of scrap paper he began to feel a quiet desperation come

over him. He had to find money somehow. Then it came to him. 'I will approach the managing director.'

He left the warehouse again, his footsteps crunching along a gravel-filled courtyard to the management building, which was set among cultured flowerbeds and banks of green lawn. He climbed two flights of stairs and entered the carpeted, air-conditioned reception to Mr Watson's office. His door was ajar, and Confidence saw Mr Watson at his desk, poring over a document. His work seemed so important. Between him and Mr Watson sat Ruth, a heavy woman with an unconvincing wig, who was typing away with long red fingernails that were very bright against her dark knuckles.

"Good morning Ruth," he said quietly but pleasantly enough, folding his arms and balling his now clammy hands into slim fists. Ruth looked up inquiringly. He seemed to have disturbed her in some immense task.

"What do you want?" she asked. Something made him doubt she knew his name. Not only was he broke, he was also anonymous.

"I see Mr Watson is in," Confidence said, looking across the carpeted space. "I have come to ask for a salary advance."

Ruth rearranged the keyboard in front of her. "The company is no longer giving advances," she said brusquely. A silence followed, during which she lifted a small mirror from her desk and examined herself.

"My wife is ill," Confidence said, not knowing what else would move this woman. Ruth looked up at him, unmoved.

"She is pregnant. There is a problem."

"What do you want me to do?" Ruth asked. The rims of her eyelids were pink. She resumed her typing. The matter was closed.

He backed off slowly, battling with a host of imaginary repercussions of his failure to raise the money. He thought of his small, childlike wife, with her shiny belly and bulging navel. 'What if something bad happens over the weekend?' he asked himself. He paused at the photocopier against the wall and his gaze was drawn to the buttons on the console. He looked again into the partially open door. Mr Watson was scribbling on the document, underlining some important point. Ruth did not look up. Confidence left the reception area and slunk off towards the stairs.

'I hate that woman!' he thought to himself angrily. There was a lump in his throat. He hated rejection. What would his wife do? What if her condition became worse? He was gripping the banister, and his shirt cuff in the periphery of his vision made him look down. He stood at the bottom of the stairs picking lint off his shirt. It was mid-morning. There was still time.

He returned to his post. A forklift was noisily re-organising a stack of bags like a squat, mobile insect. Black fumes dissipated slowly in the still air, hanging around the yellow lights at roof level. Confidence sniffed. The oily diesel fumes burned the tender parts inside his nose. Gumbo had left another pile of papers on his desk. More work. Confidence lay the pages open before him, but found that he was unable to focus on the task at hand. He leaned back in his chair.

There was nothing for it. He had to approach Mr Watson directly. He left his post once again.

“What is it now?” Ruth asked, when Confidence arrived at her desk.

“I have come to check for a fax.” He had never previously received a fax in all his three years at the company. He craned his neck to better see the fax machine behind Ruth’s bulk. His real search was for Mr Watson, who seemed not to be in his office.

“It seems it has not come,” he said, swinging his arms unworriedly, bringing the palms of his hands together, and then sauntering off.

Back in the warehouse he found Gumbo standing over his desk, frowning. “Where have you been?”

“My belly is unsettled. I needed the toilet,” Confidence lied, rubbing his belly with an open palm. Gumbo eyed him suspiciously, but said nothing further.

Valiantly though he tried, Confidence could not give his task the attention it required. Five hundred thousand dollars was not much to some people, but it was a lot to him. He imagined that Mr Watson could fish that amount from his wallet right now. He hated everyone better off than him at that moment. It was so unfair.

It was not long before his worry got the better of him and he snuck off again. He decided to approach the women in the canteen. They commiserated with him over his plight, which had a different slant for each one he spoke to, but could not assist him. The sales reps could not help, neither could the row of rheumy-eyed accounts clerks who exchanged coded looks when he spoke the figure.

He made regular trips to Mr Watson’s office. Once, he was elated to find Ruth’s desk vacant, but disappointed to find Mr Watson’s office empty. On another surreptitious visit he found Ruth hovering over a box of fried chicken like a hungry sentinel. Then, amazingly, on a now routine sortie after lunch, he found the reception in total silence, except for the shuffling of paper in Mr Watson’s office. His heartbeat picked up. ‘This is my chance.’

He made his way across the carpet and knocked timidly at the open door. His knock was so timid that Mr Watson did not seem to hear at first. A second, more assertive knock brought a reply. "Yuh!"

Confidence shuffled in and stood there quietly, waiting for Mr Watson to attend to him. He looked at his manager's shock of white hair and noticed that his moustache was black and the hair on his arms was grey.

Mr Watson finally swivelled in his chair and said, "Yuh! What do you want?" in a brusque yet not impolite way. He gazed across the desk stolidly. Confidence swallowed.

"Hello sir," he said and took hold of the back of a chair, glad that its fabric could absorb the sweat from his palms.

"I have a problem sir."

Confidence was aware that his eyes were shifting as he spoke, but he was unable to stop them.

A shadow passed across Mr Watson's eyes at that moment, as if he had decided what this was all about.

"Well mate speak up, what can I do for you?"

"I need help sir," Confidence said, and swallowed. He watched as the man across the desk folded and unfolded his arms. It was impatience, surely. Something told Confidence that his wife's illness would not be enough. People got sick every day. No, he had to convince this man that he had a serious problem.

"My brother has died," Confidence said finally. There, it was out. Now that it was said he almost believed it. His brother was no more. But Mr Watson's gaze did not change, and in fact became all the more searching. No sympathy, just a piercing look through those grey eyes. Confidence felt compelled to expand on his brother's death.

"It was a car accident."

"Yuh?" Mr Watson said; a prompt and a question together.

"I therefore need an advance."

Mr Watson shook his head minutely. "Did you talk to Ruth?"

This direct question caught Confidence unawares. He cocked his head and sucked in his cheeks.

"RUTH. Did you talk to her?"

"No sir."

"Well get hold of her. She'll update you on the new policy."

With that Mr Watson swivelled his chair and resumed his work.

That was it. No negotiation. No recourse. Confidence had been

dismissed. He backed off slowly, taking one step, then another, then a marginal twist of the torso to change direction. He was confused, he wanted to appeal, but at the same time did not want to have to look into those grey eyes again. Mr Watson turned and looked at Confidence, his eyebrows sitting lower now, "Go on, see Ruth."

Confidence walked down the stairs morosely. It was a disaster. How would he explain this to his wife?

He felt as though he could cry. He sat quietly at his desk for the next two hours. It took his most dogged powers of concentration to complete the stock sheet.

At four o'clock, with the warehouse darkening and the electric bulbs seeming brighter for the lack of natural light, Gumbo appeared.

"Have you found the money you were looking for?"

"No."

"Your shirt," Gumbo said. "I'll give you three hundred thousand."

Confidence bit his tongue. "This shirt is worth a million," he said, looking at the cuffs appraisingly.

"Well, you take it or leave it," Gumbo said and turned away.

"Wait," Confidence said. Gumbo stopped and turned around. "What will I wear home?" he said, forgetting the crumpled old shirt in his knapsack.

With an ambiguous grin, Gumbo pointed to a pile of discarded fertiliser sacks. The sacks were blue and white and marked NPK 6.24.20.

Confidence sighed. If nothing else it was enough to get his wife treated.

"Alright," he said, "I will take the money."

While undoing the buttons of the shirt, Confidence did not feel as upset as he thought he might. The purchase of the shirt had proven to be ill-fated, and he was strangely happy to be rid of it.

"You wish to be the only young-looking one in this warehouse?" Gumbo carped, and held the garment proudly at arm's length.

"No," Confidence replied, "Try the shirt on. I think it will suit you."

Metaphysica

Deon Marcus

I see a sand shrub climb a tree,
fingerlings of browning in a loveless
dream. I see a road resign its destiny, a faint
left form of sleepiness. I see a wall fall down to wear

its tiredness, the sky less blue
than it was the other day. I see clocks
unchime, hands stop in pointless gaze. Was it
always so thick and grey? I see hands all knotted tight,

knuckles balding, frightening.
I see a man in hidden pose, staring far
at what I think he does not know. And still the
creepers creep, making blind the wind and will of time.

The Jazz Goblin and His Rhythm

Brian Chikwava

Independence Day, Wednesday, 18 April 2001. I still remember the morning clearly enough. Save for my suitcase and sax, the bulk of my grubby belongings were still scattered in the open courtyard. Over the city of Harare, a dirty grey sky sagged like a vagrant's winter rag, but I couldn't care less. I had just moved into my new bedsit. One I didn't have to share with anyone. Not with pimping goblins again. Never!

The bedsit was in a state; paint peeling off the walls and ceilings, a quarter of the parquet floor tiling coming off. A broken geyser. Still I didn't mind. The squalid loneliness of my new home was a welcome relief. Whilst I felt I now understood Harare and its people, I also felt that there was something that I had completely misunderstood about the city; perhaps nine months is not long enough to fully understand a city. Before he died, my grandfather always said you can never really know a place until you have 1) fallen in love with its music 2) fallen in love with its women and 3) tried the mbanje that grows out of its soil. I thrust my hand into my junk filled pocket and excavated a sachet of mbanje. I rolled it with care; Malawi Gold; the best that you could get in Harare then. With hindsight, I think this may be where I went wrong because Malawi Gold was smuggled from Malawi. I avoided Harare grown mbanje because I imagined there was not much difference between smoking it and smoking my grandfather's white beard. "See where you got it wrong? You didn't smoke mbanje from Harare," I can imagine him croaking.

As I puffed away I could hear the wailing of sirens from a distance. Being Independence Day, I knew it could only be Uncle Bob's motorcade on its way to the National Sports Stadium where he would be addressing the nation; reminding it again why it should never forget the liberation struggle.

Sitting on the dusty floor, I rolled more of my Malawi Gold and started to reflect. It had been nine months since I left Bulawayo for Harare. My mother had thrown me out of the family home because, as she had put it "I'm not disowning you my child, but it brings bad luck for a woman to keep looking after a child who has grown a beard." I didn't have much of a beard, but I didn't want to start another quarrel. When I got off the bus in Harare, I flung my bag over my shoulder and headed straight for The Terreskane Beer Garden. I didn't want to go to my cousin's house straight away because I

wanted to defer exploiting her hospitality for as long as I could; but I also wasn't quite ready to immerse myself in her heroic domesticity. She had a couple of toddlers and had just had twins that cried all the time and stuck to her breasts like ticks. It made conversation with her a bit like shovelling coal onto a truck with a teaspoon. And the arrival of her husband from work did not change much either. After walking into the house, he would come to stand in the kitchen doorway in his grey suit. Looking startled, either by my presence or what had become of his life, he would remove his heavy-rimmed glasses, rub his eyes, before saying "Hullo Jabu." Then he would disappear to change his clothes. After that, I would only see him pottering around in flip flops, never saying much, never listening to much; just waiting for an opportunity to give my cousin another baby.

I remember stopping to buy a cigarette from a street vendor at the corner of Herbert Chitepo Avenue and Second Street, not far from The Terreskane or TK as everyone called it. I put my bag down, stretched my shoulders and yawned. My bag was fat with a pumpkin that my mother had asked me to take to my cousin, two pairs of jeans, a couple of t-shirts and an African shirt that was Made in Malaysia.

"Une Madson?" I asked. The vendor nodded, opened a box of Madison Red and shoved it into my face. I took one cigarette and lit it.

"I've got a pumpkin, you can have it for a good price," I said to him after my first puff. He smiled, shook his head politely and stared straight ahead as if I wasn't there at all. I picked up my bag and left him alone.

I contemplated first dropping the constipated bag at my cousin's, but knew it would be an involved process, requiring excuses, a bunch of lies and a host of other forms of deceit that would leave me carrying a skipload of guilt. Where would I dump such a load? I had been to Harare several times, but not enough to know where its psychological garbage dumps were. In the end I just went to The TK and got drunk.

The TK is a place that writhes with sleep starved civil servants, labourers, prostitutes, musicians, thieves and daring tourists, all after foul sex and disease. Still I had not counted on coming across The Jazz Goblin on that very first night.

The Jazz Goblin.
Wicked boy!

I've had lots of time to reflect on that first night now that they have

locked me up in this south London mental asylum. The psychiatrist says I hear voices, but the only voice I hear these days is clearly that of The Jazz Goblin; I don't need anyone giving me hundreds of other choices and confusing me.

I remember that I was anxious to introduce myself to him on the first night, but couldn't pluck up the courage; I had to psyche myself up for two weeks before doing it. People dubbed him The Jazz Goblin because his band was called *The Jazz Goblin and His Rhythm*; I just liked his confidence. He was their frontman, ripping it out on vocals and guitar, propping his performance with clichéd showmanship: "You drop and die on the dance floor, you on your own. You wan stop us having fun?" he would bark into his mike. He was accompanied by two absent-minded musicians; Zuze, on pennywhistle and Costa on percussion. But it was his colourful following that did it for me: hard drinking clerks, mbanje vendors, Figo; a football crazy security guard who also sold mbanje, and nearly always, a troupe of girls that lived by a motto they never uttered: wherever I lay my *punani* that's my home. I liked the set up; I had to join *The Jazz Goblin and His Rhythm* even though I knew they were rubbish. It would be an interesting entry into Harare's live music scene anyway, I thought then.

Joining the trio was easier than I expected. Tafi seemed pleased by my desire to be part of his band. I thought he was simply a useful idiot. Tafi thought I was kool, I could tell but didn't know why. Maybe it was because I had approached him with a fist-on-fist greeting and he had fumbled with an open hand before folding it to reciprocate my salutation. Then, I knew I had the upper hand. I was more streetwise; I had dictated the way this jazz goblin greeted me. I felt kool.

The downside of this is that koolness always comes with a grossly magnified awareness of self-invention. Because you are all too aware of your own self-invention, you see it in other people, and lose your nerve when you see someone being kool with satanic deftness. That happened to me when I asked Tafi on what days the band rehearsed. He threw his head back on his chair, lit a cigarette, blew smoke up into the air and shrugged his shoulders with a dab of detached swagger. "Just bring your sax when we have a gig. You can play what you want, no problem." My heart leapt. He looked kool. Really kool. For a moment I worried that I would be rumbled in that psychological hide and seek. That was the first time I remember being overawed by his presence.

Over the coming weeks new things began to emerge about Tafi, but they

did little to diminish the effect he had had on me. For instance he carried his guitar everywhere. I learnt that this had nothing to do with his dedication to his craft but a housing issue. I had also heard that he spent his afternoons at Market Square being hired, along with his touting chums, to unleash violence on intransigent members of the public. But by the time all this came to my realisation it was too late. I was already caught up in the affairs of *The Jazz Goblin and His Rhythm*.

I had just got a job as a motor mechanic apprentice and was moving out of my cousin's place into a two bed flat some ten minutes walk from The TK. I was looking for someone to take the other room. That's when The Jazz Goblin came to me to say "I can take the other room and can look after the flat during the day when you are at work."

I sensed an implicit threat of malicious burglary, yet I wasn't ready to live with Tafi so that he could guard the flat against himself. After an awkward silence I answered, "As long as you're happy with the rent. It's Z\$10,000 a month."

He fell silent, threw his half finished cigarette onto the floor, and took his time to put it out by grinding it with the sole of his shoe. I knew him well enough then to know that he could not afford to throw away half a cigarette, but I didn't want to let it bother me even though I sensed something lurking beneath his calm exterior.

A couple of days later after a gig he asked me if he could spend a night at my flat. "Just tonight. I won't bring the girls," he said. "Yea, no problem," I said trying not to sound thrown off. You don't want someone thinking that you are sensing their threats, it gives them an upper hand. Inside I was praying that it would be just the one night.

When I came from work the following day I found him still in the flat. I didn't say anything because I didn't want it to look like I was kicking him out. That would ruin the dynamics within the band, I reasoned. But he had eaten all my bread. I locked myself up in the bathroom for an hour while he strummed his guitar and smoked mbanje in the lounge. For the first time I hated the smell of mbanje. Tafi looked too comfortable in the flat. I consoled myself with the fact that he could not possibly hijack the other room because a colleague from work was going to be moving in over the weekend. Half an hour later I was back in the bathroom kicking myself for having just told Tafi he could stay until Saturday. He had just gazed at me vacantly and continued strumming his guitar when I expected gratitude. My insignificance weighed down on me.

I know it may look as if I didn't like Tafi, was scared of him or something like that. That may be true, but I also had other plans for the flat. After thinking about it over the previous month I had decided that this being the first time I was living independently, I would turn the flat into an environment with which I would be able to make an emotional connection. I had read from an interior deco magazine that 'emotional connection' was the in thing. But I wasn't sure I would be able to create such a place while living with a jazz goblin. I figured out that for me, this meant sticking fotos of my family all over the flat; a kind of shrine to my family: my mother, sister, my grandfather, my disappeared father and my late younger brother who was run over by a truck at the age of nine. Looking at his fotos I remembered him for his grasp of the concept of 'intention'. One day he bawled after I threw a lemon at him because he kept following me around in the house, stopping me from stealing my mother's condensed milk.

When my mother asked him what was wrong, my brother had said I had narrowly missed hitting him with a lemon. My mother thought he was being ridiculous. So did I. But that was because I failed to appreciate that what he was querying was my intention to hurt him. This may explain my unwillingness to appreciate Tafi's intentions when he asked to spend just one night at my flat.

When on Saturday, my work mate, Andrew, moved in, Tafi simply dragged the reed mat that he slept on into the lounge. Save for a Tonga stool, the lounge was raving empty anyway so I didn't say anything; I wanted to preserve my street cred. A month later Tafi had successfully drilled himself to eat Andrew's food during the day while remaining impervious to any protests. Andrew promptly moved out of the flat sneezing distress. Unlike him I was not affected by Tafi's eating habits as I had quickly stopped buying any food and only ate out. With Andrew gone Tafi quickly hauled a horse-sized prostitute into the vacant room. He called her *Bhiza Ramambo* – the emperor's horse.

Another month down the line, my 'emotional connection' project looked like a preposterous endeavour and, if I had died pursuing it, my epitaph would probably have read 'died of misadventure'. Tafi owned both the flat and myself; the band rehearsed at the flat and Tafi told me when to come in on a song. He even told me who to buy mbanje from, which meant mbanje vendors that he had not yet fallen out with for abusing the credit they gave him. He bought fish on credit from a fishmonger who regularly came to our block of flats and expected me to pay.

“The fish was for the family,” he would remind me and I would nod sheepishly, knowing that ‘family’ meant Tafi since I never even once tasted the fish. But there were times when my resentment pushed me to challenge the unfairness of our silent agreement. Then I would try to bring the matter of the rent up; Tafi would simply slither into his less fathomable persona.

“You know why I sometimes write poetry Jabu?” he would ask.

“Why?”

“It’s a better substitute for things that I sometimes feel like doing,” he would say, rolling some mbanje. Not knowing if this was meant to be a threat or performance poetry, I would ask, “What do you sometimes feel like doing?” but he would not answer. Instead he would start strumming his guitar, his guttural voice softly chanting:

*I found it
A snake under my blankets
Cold and clammy
Tonight I will kill a snake
Tonight I will kill this snake*

I ignored him.

Come the beginning of April 2001, Tafi was demanding that I make him tea and bring it into his room because he was band leader. By then, the emperor’s horse had bolted out of the stable with The Goblin’s guitar. It turned out she had been servicing The Jazz Goblin on credit and in the end had told him that if he was not prepared to pay up, he should buy himself a rubber *punani*. “There are plenty available for sale now!” she had screamed from the front door. I kept well out of it because I didn’t want what Tafi owed her to end up as another family expense. That wasn’t difficult given that I had paid every time I mounted his majesty’s horse. In return, she had been generous with genital lice, which I began to suspect originated from Tafi. I think during that time I may have had a couple of nightmares in which armies of lice were marching into my room, instructed by Tafi to seize control of my body. I can’t be sure though; Harare upset a lot of certainties in my life I tell you.

Anyway, at the time The Jazz Goblin was being told to downgrade to rubber if he couldn’t afford the real thing, I owed workmates nearly Z\$120,000. That’s six months’ wages. Everything seemed strange then; from the wall in the lounge, my grandfather stared with ever narrowing eyes, my

brother chuckled ceaselessly, my mother was giving me that eye of hers, while my father remained completely disconnected.

Then one Friday evening I came back from work to find that Tafi had moved a pair of prostitutes into the flat. One, Maria, had lost her front teeth but said that the feel of her gum was a delight to the one eyed snake, while the other, Ranga, said for Z\$3,000 she could make me cry. “\$5,000 for both of us?” Maria offered. Sitting on my reed mat, his eyes having turned into wicked slits, Tafi was puffing mbanje from a corner of his mouth and likely calculating his cut. Without a word I scurried into my room and found myself taking stock: a pimp in his vice shack with his vice girls? That was it for me. I spent the following week quietly plotting a stealthy exit. On the 18th of April, when Tafi, Maria and Ranga left the flat for free food and a free football match at the independence celebrations, I made my move.

I’m not going to go into the boring details of it except that, for a loaf of bread each, I hired a rag tag platoon of street kids to carry my belongings. In just under an hour and a half my independence had been won. That’s why I still remember the morning clearly. From the cold floor of my new bedsit, the rhythm of the jazz goblin was distant. All I could hear coming in through the broken window was the wailing sound of sirens; a creature of folklore was strutting its stuff, on its way to addressing the nation about its hard won independence. I had just won mine. I took another drag of my Malawi Gold; through an oval mouth I let out a lariat of smoke that caught my thoughts mid air and brought them crashing down, accumulating and multiplying in the far corner of the cold floor like my mother’s beads. For the first time my thoughts were collected. It felt like home.

One by One My Leaves Fall

Judy Maposa

“We are gathered here today to pay our last respects to our departed sister. She has been a friend to most of us, a shining light in the community, but above all a dutiful and loving daughter to her parents. The pain we feel...”

Dutiful and loving daughter. My beloved child. Flesh of my flesh and child of my heart. My Sipho. My gift. The last of my precious pearls.

What do they know about it? Pain? What is pain? It is a word, a word carelessly flung out without the true knowledge of its meaning.

They are all gone, my children. My four babies, all gone.

I look around at this all too familiar gathering. They have all come each bearing their sorrow. Maybe some have come to witness my grief. How does a mother grieve when all the fruits of her womb are buried in the earth? They look at me. They see my bright-eyed stare. No tears there. Long dried up.

Once, in the beginning, I could afford the luxury of tears. I remember the tears of joy when after the pangs of labour a child slid out of my womb. My blessings and my tears of joy. One by one I counted them as they were given to me. Sipho, Thando, Themba and Luba. One by one my leaves withered and fell. All dead. All gone.

The tears of my sorrow were gradually spent when I nursed Thando and Themba. I felt their pain as only one who has felt the pain of childbirth can.

Thando, the first male fruit of my womb. The strong, fun-loving boy who grew up to be such a responsible man.

Responsible? Maybe not. I just do not know. What of the child who was brought to us when Thando was a mere shadow, a skeleton with hardly any breath lingering in him? Thando whispered that the boy was his child. So I had had a grandchild I had not known about. Now I have come to know him because his mother lets him visit us. His mother is not well although she has not said. I see the same darkness in her eyes. The clawing darkness of the disease that has eaten our children. My children.

Thando, the boy who breezed through school, an athlete who brought pride to his father's heart.

Thando, who had been the youngest headmaster in the district and was clearly on his way to higher things. Struck down, just like that.

We had begun to worry that he had not married but, with assurances that

a daughter in law was in the pipeline, we hoped. Then he stopped coming home as often as he used to. Out of the blue a telephone call from a concerned colleague asking us to come and talk to our son. We went up to his school, his father and I, and, when we saw him, we despaired. We brought him home. To nurse him and watch him fade.

“Why? Why leave it so late my son?”

“Mother, I did not know how to face it. How to face you and the world.”

So I watched him fade, slowly, until life went out of him.

The pain was raw, the tears a daily rain. We buried him, a statistic fallen into the belly of the disease.

Five months later, before time had a chance to heal our sorrow, Themba came home. They say children are blessings from God. Some are more of a blessing than others, but to a mother’s heart all her children are special.

Themba had always been different. He gave us more trouble than all the other children put together. Always getting into little scraps, which he carried over into adulthood. Instead of getting through secondary school, we got a call one day telling us that he had made it across the border to seek his fortune. Like so many young people faced with unemployment, he chose to try his luck in a neighbouring country.

We accepted his chosen path. In my heart I prayed for him. I prayed that he not fall into bad ways and be returned to us in a coffin, a fate so common to these border jumpers.

Well, my prayers were answered. Themba was alive when he came home. But barely. His young body was a wreck. Gangster wars. So we knew that our son had fallen and joined the bad crowd who sought easy money. Although he made it home, his body had been too battered to heal itself. He lingered briefly and was gone, another of my children returned to the earth so soon.

I wept. Cried for a life extinguished so young. What had my son achieved? Would he have mended his ways and led a purposeful life? So many questions but no answers. My two boys dead so soon after each other. Hopes and dreams never to be fulfilled.

“Remember Job. Did he not lose everything he possessed? Did he not lose all his children? God does everything in his own time and He has a purpose for everything. We are not to turn away from Him. We are to remain steadfast in faith until His purpose is revealed. May someone lead us in song, then we shall pray.”

A woman raises her voice and leads us in song; it is the hymn that details our pilgrimage on earth. We are all pilgrims, our lives a passage, until we reach our heavenly home. Are my children home? Where are Thando, Themba, Luba and Sipho?

Luba, my flower. Beautiful and warm like the flame lilies growing on the mountain valley in which she was conceived.

Luba who desired nothing more in life than to marry and raise a family. At 18 she brought us a son-in-law. A man twice her age but who clearly adored her. All the marriage rites performed and the conventional white wedding. Two lovely grandchildren within five years.

Luba the contented housewife. I was happy for my child, happy that she found joy in marriage.

“Mother, prepare yourself for another grandchild,” Luba tells me. Her cup is full. She is in her element. But stormy weather ahead.

“Mother, my child ails. I am at my wit’s end. Please come and help with the other children.”

“Yes, my child, I shall help.”

I find tension in my daughter’s house. Muffled voices behind the bedroom door. My weak grandchild dies. Luba inconsolable, slowly withers as she sinks into a depression.

“Luba, for the sake of your other children pull out of this grief. You shall have others, you are young yet.” She makes the effort and slowly I glimpse something of her old self. But there is a dent in the marriage. What has happened? I return to my home.

“Mother, Luba is in hospital. Meningitis.” A giant fear enters my heart. Defeat and despair. I sit by her bedside, listen to her ravings.

“The bastard, the bastard, may he rot in hell. How could he give me this? I will see him dead first. I loved you, trusted you with my life. You whoring bastard, you brought the disease to my house, our home. Where is my child? Bring me my baby. You shall pay for this with your miserable life.”

And so the ranting and raving went. We could not look each other in the eye, my son-in-law and I.

Luba did not make it. She died, bitterness and scorn pouring out from the confusion in her mind.

I did not cry.

They are lowering the coffin into the gaping earth. Slowly it disappears from

my view into the neat rectangular mouth. Singing.

Sipho, alone in that coffin, alone in this world too. Always the deep one, my first-born child. Maybe it was the burden of responsibility you felt as the first among your siblings.

We all failed you. How could I not have known what was happening to you all those years ago? Your own uncle, molesting you. It is a good thing that death took him before we knew his evil deed. But he passed on the same death to you. Now you lie in that coffin, cold.

Sipho, my ever-practical child. Despite all the pain you suffered, you moved on. Without my help you tried to take as much as you could out of life.

It is nine years since you told me you had the disease. You told me you were fighting it. You had the courage to forge ahead where others simply gave up. But still it crept up on you. You are gone now. No children to carry your memory.

Sipho, my gift. The very first fruit of my womb, the last of my brood to desert me. I am laid bare, a tree that has lost its leaves in a permanent winter.

“... and the dust shall return to dust. We shall start with close relatives and proceed from there. A song, please.”

Singing.

I gather myself up, with an aunt holding me, trying to keep the mourning blanket from slipping off. I look down into the grave, pause, then scoop up a handful of the proffered earth. It is a rich dark earth. Slowly the grains trickle through my fingers, drift into the grave and silently settle on the coffin.

Goodbye, my child. It is finished. I shuffle away. No more tears.

Contributors

Adrian Ashley (*The Request*) was born in Bulawayo in 1978. He grew up there and nurtured his interest for writing in that city's venerable public library. He was a participant in the British Council Crossing Borders Writing Project and has had a short story published in the Weaver Press anthology *Writing Now*. He is at present living in Malawi.

Raisedon Baya (*Cain and Abel*) is the second born in a family of seven children. His short stories have appeared in several magazines. He is an award winning playwright and director whose works have toured internationally with Amakhosi Theatre, Rooftops Promotions, and Siyaya Arts. Some of his popular works include *Witnesses and Victims*, *Rags and Garbage*, *Madmen and Fools* and the banned *Super Patriots and Morons*. Raisedon is a former participant of the Crossing Borders Writing Project, and writes a regular arts column for the *Sunday News*. Currently he works full time for Zimbabwe Television as a commissioning editor.

Wendy Blakeley (*The Matriarch*) has been visiting and living in Zimbabwe since 1993. She is Community Arts Coordinator for Iganyana Arts and Crafts and resides in Dete, where she is constantly grateful to be near Hwange National Park and to the local people who have made her comfortable and welcome.

Wim Boswinkel (*A Matter of Statistics*) was born in 1947. He left Holland straight after school to become involved in farming and tourism in South America and Africa. He has lived in Bulawayo since 1988. Wim had a short story published in *Short Writings from Bulawayo II*. His novel *Erina* was published by 'amaBooks in 2003.

Catherine Buckle (*The Ambulance*) was born and educated in Zimbabwe, graduating from the School of Social Work in 1978. She has six books in print, four fiction and two non-fiction, and wrote a regular column for the Daily News until its closure in 2003. She is a single mother of a 13 year old boy and lives in Marondera.

Diana Charsley (*Forgiveness*) grew up on a farm in Mashonaland and went to Queen Elizabeth Girls' High School, where she managed a '5' for English Language at O Level. Being a late starter, she completed a degree through UNISA when she was fifty, and discovered she enjoyed writing short stories, both times. She would like to write more but God, government and grandchildren seem to have other ideas

Brian Chikwava (*The Jazz Goblin and His Rhythm*) is from Bulawayo, but has been resident in London for the past three years. He is a singer/songwriter and recently released *Jacaranda Sketches*, his first recording since arriving in the United Kingdom. Brian won the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2004 for his short story *Seventh Street Alchemy in Writing Still*. He was recently a Charles Pick fellow at the University of East Anglia and is currently working on a novel.

Mathew Chokuwenga (*Uncle Benny*) owns and runs a clothing shop. As well as writing, he paints, sculpts and plays music. He won an award for English Literature in the UNDP Artists against Poverty Competition, has exhibited at the Delta and Verandah Galleries and has recently released his first musical CD. He has had short stories published in *Short Writings from Bulawayo I and II*.

Bhekilizwe Dube (*Tearing the Curtain*) works as a literature teacher in Bulawayo. He studied literature, linguistics, Spanish and theatre arts at the University of Zimbabwe for two years. He has worked as a playwright, poet, dancer and actor with Sofika Performing Arts and as an arts administrator for the School of African Awareness in Bulawayo.

Jason Emde (*A Secret Place*) was born and raised in Canada, spent a year in Zimbabwe as a Rotary Exchange Student, and has lived in Japan since 1995. Last year his first book, *My Hand's Tired And My Heart Aches: Letters From Japan*, was published. He claims to currently be working on a book of poetry, a collection of travel writing, a collection of short stories, and an amateur film about English conversation schools in Japan, but the inside word is that he's not doing much more these days than quitting smoking, playing chess and drinking too much coffee. He hopes to return to Zimbabwe someday.

John Eppel (*Home Sweet Home* and *Sonnet with One Unstated Line*) lives in Bulawayo where he teaches English at Christian Brothers College. His first novel, *D.G.G. Berry's The Great North Road*, won the M-Net Prize in South Africa. His second novel, *Hatchings*, which was short-listed for the M-Net Prize and was chosen for the series in the *Times Literary Supplement* on the most significant books to have come out of Africa, is to be published by 'amaBooks in 2006. His first book of poems, *Spoils of War*, won the Ingrid Jonker Prize. His other novels, *The Giraffe Man*, *The Curse of the Ripe Tomato* and *The Holy Innocents*, and his poetry anthologies *Sonata for Matabeleland* and *Selected Poems: 1965-1995* have received critical acclaim. His most recent publications are *The Caruso of Colleen Bawn and Other Short Writings* and *Songs My Country Taught Me*.

David Goodwin (*Native*) was born in Bulawayo in 1958 and educated at Christian Brothers College, Cape Town and London. He worked in private practice as a Land Surveyor, lectured for seventeen years at the University of Zimbabwe and is presently studying again at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand. Previous poetry published includes a book shared with five others, various magazines in the United Kingdom, and an anthology. He has also won an award in a Scottish poetry competition.

Albert Gumbo (*Another Day*) is a Zimbabwean with a global outlook. He is Vice President of the Alliance Francaise de Harare, a member of the Hellenic School Parents' Association Committee and active in civic affairs. He was an active member of the Bulawayo community while resident here, but now lives and works in Harare. One of his short stories was published in the Weaver Press anthology *Writing Now*.

Pete Hutton (*Jock Sherlaw*), originally from England, spent 13 years teaching in school and running a tourist business in Bulawayo. He has always written casually, and was inspired to write many short stories - real life sketches - while living there. As an outsider, but one who slowly became fully integrated into Zimbabwean life, he found himself able to present his observations from an unusual perspective. He moved, reluctantly, to New Zealand a few years ago, but still writes about Bulawayo.

Ignatius Tirivangani Mabasa (*Paying to Die*) started off as a poet before venturing into prose. His poetry has been published in the anthologies *Tipeiwo Dariro* and *Muchinokoro Kunaka*. He has written one novel in Shona, *Mapenzi (Fools)*, which won first prize in the Zimbabwe Book Publishers' Association Awards in 2000 and was subsequently nominated as one of Zimbabwe's 75 Best Books of the century. One of his short stories appeared in *Writing Now*. Ignatius has visited colleges in the USA, both as a Fulbright Scholar and a visiting writer. He is married and has two sons.

Judy Maposa (*One by One My Leaves Fall*) was born in Bulawayo in 1972, and at an early age would lose herself in a world of words and imagination in the Tshabalala library. The eldest child of a family of seven she lived for some time in the early 80's in her rural Gwanda home, which nurtured a deep love for the open spaces and rocky heights of natural Zimbabwe. She is now the quality controller for the *Sunday News* and is studying for a University of South Africa degree.

Deon Marcus (*Metaphysica*) was born in Bulawayo in 1978 and educated at Milton Junior School and Christian Brothers College. He also studied piano and viola at the Zimbabwe Academy of Music and is currently a member of the Bulawayo Philharmonic Orchestra. He holds an Honours Degree in Accounting Science from the University of South Africa, and is currently in his final year of a Bachelor of Arts degree in classical studies. His poems have been published in *Short Writings from Bulawayo I and II* and his poetry collection, *Sonatas*, won the 2005 National Arts Merit Award for Outstanding First Creative Published Book.

Owen Maseko (Cover Painting: *We Shall Rise*) was born in Filabusi in 1975, but is now a painter and ceramic sculptor in Bulawayo. He has exhibited at the National Gallery of Zimbabwe in Bulawayo and at the Verandah Gallery in Harare. His works are held in collections in South Africa, Holland and the United States of America. He is currently the chairperson of the Visual Artists Association of Bulawayo.

Pentecost Mate (*Pay Day*) was born in Shurugwi in 1972, but was educated and now lives and works as a teacher in Bulawayo. He won first prize in the Randalls National Creative Writing Competition in 1988 and has had several stories, poems and articles published in local newspapers and magazines. He was the editor of Ndaba Sibanda's *Love O'Clock*, published in 2005.

Christopher Mlalazi (*id i*) was born in 1970 in the Plumtree district, but brought up in Bulawayo. A fiction writer, poet, and playwright, Christopher was a participant in the British Council Crossing Borders Writing Project. In 2005, he represented the country at the Uganda Literature Festival, and, in 2006, he attended the Caine Prize Workshop in Kenya. He has had short stories published in several anthologies and is working on his first novel. Six of his plays have been performed by various theatre companies, including Umkhathi and Amakhosi.

Farai Mpfu (*Your Burden*) was born in 1980 in Bulawayo, a first born child in a family of five. He grew up in the townships of Bulawayo, attending school at Cyrene Mission. He later studied at the University of Zimbabwe, from where he graduated with an honours degree in theatre arts. Farai has had short stories published in *Short Writings from Bulawayo I* and *II* and in *Writing Now*. He is temporarily living and working in Harare.

Mzana Mthimkhulu (*The Concert*) was born in 1954 at Mpilo Hospital. He has lived in Bulawayo for most of his life and is currently a human resources practitioner. His short stories and social commentaries have appeared in several newspapers and magazines in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Mzana has had short stories published in *Short Writings from Bulawayo I* and *II* and in *Writing Now*. Mzana is married and has three children.

Tinashe Mushakavanhu (*The Harare Hermit*) was born in Harare, later moving to Gweru, and is one of the 'born free' generation of Zimbabwean writers. He studied English at Midlands State University, Gweru, and hopes to pursue an MA in Creative Writing. He was, and still is, the youngest writer to have participated in the British Council Crossing Borders Writing Project. His short stories have appeared in several collections. Tinashe is National Secretary of the Budding Writers Association of Zimbabwe.

Mary Ndlovu (*Hands*) was born in Canada in 1942 and educated in Toronto and New York. She worked as a teacher in Zambia where she met Edward Ndlovu, whom she married in 1972. They moved to Zimbabwe in 1980, where they had three children. She has worked as a teacher in secondary schools and lectured at tertiary level. She then worked for the Legal Resources Foundation developing training programmes in legal and human rights. Mary lives in Bulawayo and is active in promoting library services in Matabeleland South.

Thabisani Ndlovu (*The Boy with a Crooked Head*) was born in Lupane in 1971 and was educated in Bulawayo. He studied Literature in English to Masters level at the University of Zimbabwe and now works as a teacher at Falcon College. He writes so that the reader takes an emotional journey charted by the words he puts together. There's a happiness in that journey although some of the words talk of painful things. It is the journey that is important. He has won several prizes for his writing, the most recent being first prize in the Intwasa Arts Festival koBulawayo Short Story Competition.

Albert Nyathi (*Ode to Departed Writers*) is a performance dub-poet. He started fusing his written poems with music so as to blow life into them, to blow life into dead words. He has performed in many countries throughout the world and has released 4 CDs. He has just released a DVD, recorded live in Durban, the UK and Zimbabwe, titled *The World As We Dance Along*. Albert won the Zimbabwe National Poetry Award in 1995 and his poetry collection, *Echoes from the Kraal*, was published in 2001.

Pathisa Nyathi (*The Silent Prince*) was born in Sankonjana, Kezi. He was a teacher, lecturer and head teacher before becoming an Education Officer and then Deputy Provincial Education Director for Matabeleland North. He is now working for Bulawayo City Council as Public Relations Officer. He is a published poet, playwright, historian and biographer; his most recent publications being *In Search of Freedom: Masotsha Ndlovu, Material Culture of the AmaNdebele, Izibongo Lezangelo ZamaNdebele kaMzilikazi, Alvord Mabena: the Man and his Roots, Traditional Ceremonies of the AmaNdebele* and *Zimbabwe's Cultural Heritage*. He is a columnist for the *Sunday News*, *Umthunywa*, *The Sunday Mirror* and *Sky Host*.

John Simcoe Read (*Butterflies Drift into the Edges of our City Life*) was born in Harare and has lived in Mashonaland and Midlands as part of those farming communities. He trained in Pietermaritzburg, Cape Town and Oxford. He joined the National University of Science and Technology in Bulawayo from the University of Zimbabwe as Professor of Applied Biology and Biochemistry in 2000 and since then has enjoyed exploring the biological diversity of the urban communities in Bulawayo.

Bryony Rheam (*The Rhythm of Life*) was born in Kadoma in 1974. She went to school in Bulawayo, before moving to the UK where she obtained a BA and MA in English. After being away from Bulawayo for over ten years, she still feels a strong allegiance to it and to Matabeleland in general, planning to return in the near future. She is a part time English teacher and has a one year old daughter, Sian.

Cornelus Sanders (*The Road*) is a dermatologist working at the University Medical Centre in Utrecht, Netherlands, heading the clinical department. He is especially interested in infectious diseases and autoimmune diseases. He has worked in South America and in Nigeria, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. While in Zimbabwe from 1994 until 1997 he worked for the City Health Services in Bulawayo and organized a Sexually Transmitted Infections Training Centre, ran clinics and was involved in HIV prevention programmes.

Owen Sheers (*Drinking with Hitler*) was born in Fiji in 1974 and brought up in Abergavenny, South Wales. The winner of an Eric Gregory Award and the 1999 *Vogue* Young Writers' Award, his first collection of poetry, *The Blue Book* was short-listed for the Welsh Book of the Year and the Forward Prize Best First Collection 2001. His debut prose work, *The Dust Diaries*, a travel memoir set in Zimbabwe, was short-listed for the Royal Society of Literature's Ondaatje Prize and won the Welsh Book of the Year 2005. Owen has also written for radio, TV and newspapers and has toured extensively. In 2004 he was Writer in Residence at The Wordsworth Trust and was selected as one of the Poetry Book Society's 20 *Next Generation Poets*. Owen's second collection of poetry, *Skirrid Hill* was published in 2005. He currently lives in London and is writing his first novel.

Godfrey M. Sibanda (*Itekiya*) was born in Bulawayo in 1969. Most of his formative years were spent in Bulawayo and he completed his education at the University of Zimbabwe and the University Complutense de Madrid. He taught mathematics in several schools before becoming a Spanish/English translator/interpreter and tourist guide. He now works as a tourist guide around Southern Africa, based in Cape Town.

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